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Were traffic impact fees spent on the right things?

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e-mail: jburger@bakersfield.com | Saturday, Aug 4 2007 9:45 PM

Last Updated: Saturday, Aug 4 2007 9:48 PM

If you bought a new home in Bakersfield sometime in the past 15 years chances are you entrusted the city of Bakersfield with some of your hard-earned cash to build roads.

The money may not have appeared on your mortgage papers.

But you can bet it was buried in the price of your property.

Traffic impact fees are billed to land developers to pay for new roads, traffic signals and freeways.

And developers, industry leaders say, pass some of that cost on to you.

Those facts led *The Californian* to ask a couple of basic questions about Bakersfield's impact fee program:

Where did the money go?

Did the city of Bakersfield spend it well?

What the money bought

The city of Bakersfield spent \$81 million in "traffic development" dollars between the founding of the impact fee program in 1992 and June 2006.

Here are some of the biggest line items in the city's traffic impact spending history.

The city spent \$38.5 million to build bridges over canals, freeways, railroads and the Kern River.

A little more than \$1.9 million was spent on building new roads.

Some \$4.1 million was spent on installing traffic signals.

Land purchases to make way for future roads ate up \$5.58 million.

And widening of existing roads drew \$7.25 million of traffic impact fees.

No match

Impact fees are justified, legally, when the city drafts a list of projects that must be built to handle traffic from new homes and shopping centers.

The majority of the dollars the city spent were spent directly on projects that were on the impact fee list.

But a portion weren't.

One of the most notable of non-fee projects was a resurfacing job on Gosford Road between Ming Avenue and Stockdale Highway.

Resurfacing, in general, is not something traffic impact fee money is spent on.

It doesn't increase the amount of traffic a road can carry and it doesn't relieve congestion on major routes like Gosford Road.

But the city of Bakersfield spent \$515,863 in traffic impact fees on the project.

Bakersfield Assistant Public Works Director Jacques LaRochelle explained why he thinks the spending was justified.

The money the city spent went to put in three turn lanes. From his point of view the money was spent to relieve congestion -- allowing slower, turning traffic to stay out of the way of autos in faster "through" lanes.

"I see that as a legitimate expense for the traffic impact fee," he said.

LaRochelle did say that, if the expenditure was legitimate, the project should be added to the fee list.

"It's a fairly big city and, occasionally, we'll miss things," he said. "We will see things, doggone it, that should have been on the list."

Beyond asphalt

Some of the things the city spent traffic impact fees on might surprise you.

The city spent \$2,370 to train a staff member to use a traffic modeling system that is run by the Kern Council of Governments.

"We had to understand the model," LaRochelle said. "In my mind that's money well spent."

In another case the city spent \$146,818 studying whether it could run a planned freeway through a railway yard north of California Avenue just east of Highway 99.

The result of the study: the railroad land would be too expensive to buy.

Construction of that freeway, called the Centennial Corridor by the city, is clearly defined as a project on the impact fee list.

But did spending that \$146,818 on the railroad study actually help the project get done?

LaRochelle said yes -- eliminating the railroad yard was important to establishing a final line for a critical \$600 million freeway.

Then there is the impact fee money spent on staff time.

Over 15 years the city has spent \$528,391 on various study, design and engineering projects done by staff.

LaRochelle looks at staff time as a valid way to spend developer fee money. Project costs involve far more than just the cost to pour concrete and lay asphalt, he said.

Spending traffic impact fee money on work done by city staff keeps that cost from shrinking the

city's general fund -- which pays for things like police officers and fire stations, LaRochelle said.

Rosedale burning

In one of the most unique expenditures, the city of Bakersfield used traffic dollars to buy land to move a fire station off Rosedale Highway.

The Rosedale station, which sits next to the Northwest Promenade shopping center, stands in the way of efforts to widen the state highway route.

There is only one hitch.

The Rosedale fire station is a Kern County station and the county has no intention of giving up control of it.

So the city's purchase of land, made on the assumption that the county would turn over control of the station to the city, was made prematurely.

The impact fee fund should be paid back the \$161,384 it paid to buy an alternative station site, LaRochelle said.

Get the job done

Cassie Daniel of the Homebuilders Association of Kern County said holding the city accountable for how it spends industry money is important. The money developers contribute to transportation should only be used on projects that increase road capacity -- not on maintaining old roads and fixing problems of the past.

LaRochelle said the impact fee is a critical tool the city use to help handle the impact that new development can have on the roads we all drive each day.

It's a tool he believes in using to its utmost.

"I'll explore any avenue to fund a project," LaRochelle said. "If a portion of it is traffic fee related, I'm going to put as much money as I can into it."

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