

Builders, officials draw battle lines over proposed traffic assessments

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The Metro Council will likely defer a proposed system of traffic impact fees Wednesday, but some city-parish officials say it's just a matter of time until it becomes reality.

The mayor's chief administrative officer, Walter Monsour, said the mayor doesn't need council approval to implement the proposal that would raise the price of an average new house by \$532 in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Monsour said the mayor is attempting to lock in the new impact fees in a council-passed ordinance at the request of the Baton Rouge Growth Coalition.

Coalition Executive Director Michael McDuff said his organization has been pushing for more fair impact fees for years. Placing the new impact fees in an ordinance would provide stability, since any change would require a majority of the council, he said.

Currently, developers pay a traffic impact fee of \$200 to pull a permit on a new house. Commercial developments that encompass at least 30,000 square feet must negotiate a contribution to the city-parish, McDuff said.

Commercial projects less than 30,000 square feet currently pay no traffic impact fees, Mc Duff said.

"We need a traffic impact fee that's fair, and applies to everyone," McDuff said.

The proposed impact fees are based on the type of development, its square footage, and how much traffic it is projected to generate.

"The worst thing that could happen is to let the traffic congestion get to the point where the city-parish imposes a moratorium on new construction," McDuff said.

Metro Council may table fees

Monsour said the lack of a reasonable traffic impact fee system is one of the reasons that traffic congestion is so bad in East Baton Rouge Parish.

"It's why we are where we are today. In the last 10 years, we've only collected \$2 million in traffic impact fees. Is that a joke?" Monsour asked.

The new traffic impact fees have drawn heavy criticism from the local Association of Realtors and the Capital Area Homebuilders Association. They argued the extra costs will drive development into surrounding parishes.

McDuff said their opposition shouldn't be surprising since both are tied to national organizations that have a policy of opposing new impact fees.

Herb Gomez, executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Association of Realtors, said he doubts the mayor has the legal authority to raise impact fees without the council.

"It's for the lawyers to decide, but there are some people who even question whether it's legal for the council to do it," Gomez said.

He said his organization has asked for some revisions to the impact fee ordinance that don't involve the fee amounts.

Monsour said the revisions have to do with the timing of the impact fees and other issues.

Monsour said he's agreed to postpone the council's consideration of the traffic impact fee ordinance until Aug. 22 in order to give time to the Realtors and Homebuilders time to consider the proposed impact fees.

"Nobody's asking them to support it. All we're asking them to do is not oppose it," Monsour said of the proposed impact fee ordinance.

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