

Monsour: Developers' gripes spur administrative solution

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Threats by real estate agents and builders to lobby the Metro Council against a proposed increase in East Baton Rouge traffic-impact fees prompted Mayor Kip Holden's office to play hardball.

Holden's chief administrative officer, Walter Monsour, said Tuesday the Mayor's Office will pull the proposal from the council's agenda today and impose the new fees administratively.

Monsour said the mayor has the legal authority to increase the fees, which will be collected from new building permits to help offset the cost of growth-related road improvements.

The main reason for going to the council was to lock the proposed new traffic-impact fees into an ordinance to make it harder for future mayors to increase them, Monsour said.

Mayor to set impact fees

He said he tried to negotiate with the local Board of Realtors and Capital Region Builders Association, but they never made any counter proposals.

Currently, the city-parish collects a flat traffic-impact fee of \$200 on building permits pulled for each new home in East Baton Rouge Parish. The proposed traffic-impact fees would vary according to square footage, but would raise the fee for an average home to \$732.

Monsour said he received an e-mail Tuesday from Herb Gomez, executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Association of Realtors, saying his organization could not support the proposed impact-fee ordinance slated to go before the council today.

"He (Gomez) said in the e-mail that they will be contacting members of the council to express their continued opposition," Monsour said.

"I had said previously that if they were going to lobby the council to oppose this, I was going to pull the ordinance down and do it administratively — and I have a legal opinion that

we can do that," he said.

Holden said Tuesday evening he supports Monsour's plan to have the fees imposed without a vote of the council.

Gomez could not be reached for comment at his office Tuesday.

On behalf of the Capital Region Builders Association, Roy Domangue Jr. said his organization is also opposed to the higher fees because they may drive development to other parishes.

Domangue said a recent study shows that for every \$1,000 increase in the cost of a home, some 660 people in East Baton Rouge Parish will be priced out of the market over a year's time.

Domangue said many young families are already being priced out of the East Baton Rouge housing market because of post-Katrina increases in material and labor.

Instead of tagging new homes with extra fees, Domangue said, city-parish officials should impose a new fee or tax that is related to vehicles that actually use the roads.

Monsour said he doesn't believe that an extra \$500 or \$600 is going to keep anyone from buying a new house.

Among those pushing the higher traffic-impact fees was the Baton Rouge Growth Coalition, which claims the system is unfair.

Under the system, commercial developments that encompass at least 30,000 square feet must negotiate a contribution to the city-parish.

Commercial projects less than 30,000 square feet pay no traffic-impact fees, even though some of them — like convenience stores and fast-food restaurants — are major generators of traffic.

Monsour said the proposed new impact fees are based on a study that projected the impact of different types and sizes of development on traffic.

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