



Building fee hikes supported by county

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If you're planning to build something in Clark County, you might want to do it soon.

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County commissioners Wednesday endorsed a round of major building fee hikes that would raise millions of dollars for wider county roads while deterring the construction of cheap housing.

The price of building a new single-family home would leap by \$4,900 in Glenwood, Barberton and Brush Prairie, an area north of the Padden Parkway that the county now calls "North Orchards."

Building fees for homes and businesses would go up throughout the unincorporated county and city of Vancouver, with other big increases in Salmon Creek, Mount Vista, the fairgrounds and in the county's nearer rural areas.

Commissioners say the fee hikes are needed to help plug a \$300 million gap in the county's road budget, created by rising construction costs and the expected arrival of about 180,000 new residents over 20 years.

"Growth is paying the way in the area where growth is occurring," Commissioner Steve Stuart said in a work session Wednesday.

Commissioners expect to approve the new fees along with their 20-year growth plan. They said they'll hold two public hearings before passage, now set for Sept. 25.

"I'm ready to take it on the road," Commissioner Betty Sue Morris said of the fee hike, which has been discussed for months but not calculated until this week.

Because a big new building faces the same fees as a small new one, the builders of small shops and homes are harder hit by rising transportation fees.

"The person trying to buy an 1,800-square-foot house is just facing an enormous cost load, regardless of where he goes," said Steve Madsen, a spokesman for the Building Industry Association of Clark County. "I'm quite sure that segment of the market does not get front-and-center consideration."

The county's schools, too, have been raising the building fees they use to help pay for new buildings.

Battle Ground Public Schools, which serves the county's "North Orchards" area, last year hiked its fee for a new single-family home from \$3,000 to \$7,636.

With rising fees and land costs, Madsen said, fewer developers want to put up small entry-level homes.

Businesses face a similar dynamic.

"The people who are doing the commercial development are not the entrepreneurs anymore," Madsen said. "They are the corporate business parks, the Columbia Tech Centers."

Higher building fees might be good news for local taxpayers, who would bear a slightly smaller share of the county's transportation costs.

The proposed hikes would raise the share of those costs paid by developers from 30 percent to 35 percent, county road planner Steve Schulte said.

The fast-rising fees in the county's outlying areas will encourage more building in urban centers, Stuart said.

"There's a natural incentive built in," he said.

Madsen, the building industry spokesman, said the county should be taking a harder look at public transportation, instead of charging more and more for new roads.

"I don't know what the solution is," he said. "I can tell you it's my opinion that a \$7,000 to \$8,000 transportation impact fee is not the solution, though."

Steve Horenstein, an attorney who often represents developers, had mixed feelings about the proposal.

"Do we need it? Perhaps," he said. "But will it limit job growth? Probably." Commissioner Betty Sue Morris really, really wants some new restaurants in her Salmon Creek-Hazel Dell neighborhood.

How much?

Enough to ask county staff members to carve out a special exemption for such businesses from the heightened building fees that commissioners voiced support for Wednesday.

"If a great developer comes in and puts in an Olive Garden, a Red Lobster, an Outback ? they ought to really get a deal on their impact fees," Morris said. "I'm serious."

Public Works Director Pete Capell said his office would work on it.

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