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Horry impact fees vote delayed

Green space rules adopted

By Mike Cherney

The Sun News

Horry County Council delayed its vote Tuesday on an impact fee and instead opted to hold a workshop on the topic next week.

The council also voted to approve new development guidelines that would require more new subdivisions to include green space and make developers responsible for more road repairs.

County Council Chairwoman Liz Gilland said the workshop would allow council members to learn more about impact fees before deciding on whether to support the proposal. An exact time for the workshop has not been set.

Before creating an impact fee, a charge levied on new homes that would pay for roads, parks and public safety, the county would have to update a 2001 study by consulting firm TischlerBise. The study would calculate an appropriate per-home fee. State law requires that the county update the study.

At its last meeting, the council passed the first of three readings of the impact fee ordinance, but voted against updating the TischlerBise study, which would have cost the county \$101,000.

During Tuesday's meeting, some council members stressed the importance of finding new ways to pay for public services without raising property taxes, especially since the county is collecting less revenues than projected due to the real estate slump.

Westley Sawyer, the county's budget director, said last week there is a \$4 million gap between projected revenues and actual revenues. Officials have said that building permit and recording fees are down.

"This will be the most interesting budget that I've dealt with in 30 years," Danny Knight, the county administrator, told council members.

One new expense could be paying off \$62 million in bonds to add 700 beds to J. Reuben Long Detention Center and to pay for five library projects. The council passed the second of three required readings to borrow the money at its meeting.

Gilland said the annual operating cost for expansion at the jail, which is now overcrowded, would be \$5 million. The bonds would be paid off over the next 15 to 20 years, according to a county memo.

"It would be a shame on all of us if we didn't put that on the table at budget time," Councilman Howard Barnard said of the proposed impact fee. "I'd vote for an impact fee before I'd vote for a property tax increase."

The council will meet in April to start determining the budget for fiscal year 2009, which begins July 1.

The council also voted Tuesday to grant final approval to new development guidelines. Developers are now required to include green space in developments of at least two units per acre and place a three-year warranty on public roads.

Previously, developers were required to include open space in subdivisions of four units per acre or more. Only a one-year warranty on public roads was previously required.

David Schwerd, a county planner, said the new guidelines reduce green space requirements to 500 square feet per single-family home. But the guidelines also improve the quality of green space, no longer allowing areas such as strips of grass along roads to qualify.

It also makes it easier for developers to contribute money to the county that would be used to purchase green space elsewhere if the required green space is not included in the new subdivision.

Pam Creech, a member of Horry County Pride, a group that lobbies for public infrastructure, said high quality green space in new subdivisions was inadequate under the old guidelines.

"You could have 800 children on 100 acres of property, and there is nothing for them to do," said Creech, who supported the changes, on Monday. "They don't have a yard big enough to play ball in." Contact MIKE CHERNEY at 444-1765.

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