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Neighborhoods

Traffic impact fee under study in South Fayette

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By Brian David, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

South Fayette has taken the first tentative steps for enacting a traffic impact fee ordinance that would charge developers for road improvements.

"You have a relatively open community, but one that's developing rapidly and is poised for further development," Ed Gergerich, a traffic engineer for the national engineering consulting firm PBS&J, told the South Fayette Planning Commission last Thursday. "That puts you right in the range for this kind of ordinance."

Commissioners Cindy Cox and Sue Caffrey who were in attendance said they were in general agreement that the township should keep exploring the possibility.

"I like the fact that it makes everything the same across the board," Ms. Cox said. South Fayette now negotiates with individual developers to get help with local road needs -- a system that can't guarantee that the right improvements are being made or that the contributions are fairly distributed.

To create a traffic impact fee ordinance, South Fayette planners would need to assess what the township would be at "build-out" -- that is, with every plot of land developed to its fullest potential. Then they would see what kind of local road network would be needed and calculate how much it would cost to build.

That amount would then be used to calculate each new developer's share, based on how much traffic the development will generate.

Ray Caruso of PBS&J said his firm helped develop such ordinances for high-growth communities -- neighboring Findlay and Pine, Marshall and Richland in Allegheny County's fast-growing northern tier. Indiana and West Deer also are pursuing a joint study on the issue.

And in Butler County, Cranberry partnered with Manheim Township in Lancaster County to get the fees pushed through the legislature in 1990.

When a municipality experiences a growth surge, roads often are destroyed by heavy volume traffic. And while the new developments raise the municipality's tax base, they don't raise it enough to pay for new roads, so taxes must be raised -- essentially making the long-time residents help pay for problems caused by their new neighbors.

The goal of impact fees is to get the new neighbors to pay into a fund to upgrade the roads without putting the burden on the long-time residents.

Such upgrades are a looming issue in South Fayette, which is making a rapid transition from farm country into suburbia. It has miles and miles of roads with township engineer Dave Gardner kindly described as "substandard" and Ms. Caffrey more pointedly described as "goat paths."

Mr. Caruso said the fees vary depending on the nature of the municipality, but typically average around \$1,000 per "trip," or \$1,000 for each car a development will put onto local roads during peak traffic hours.

But the money is not without restrictions. It must be used for new roads or upgrades to existing roads that are identified in the build-out plan, not for fixing or maintaining existing roads. And the fees cannot be charged retroactively; plans that are in the works before the fees are approved cannot be assessed.

Thus, Newbury -- a mammoth commercial and residential development approved in November -- will not have to pay impact fees. It does not mean, however, that Newbury is not doing its share in terms of traffic improvements. It negotiated with South Fayette and the state Department of Transportation a package of upgrades to area intersections, worth about \$5 million.

If Newbury were subject to an impact fee ordinance, its assessment would be rather large as well; commercial developments tend to pay more because they generate more traffic, and quick-stop, high-traffic businesses like fast food restaurants and gas stations pay more than low-traffic businesses like furniture stores.

"Pine has told us that the fees tend to discourage the high-trip generators," Mr. Caruso said. "But they said that's fine with them, because they want the higher-end businesses anyway."

Mr. Caruso said developing a fee ordinance could take about a year and would cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000, though the cost of the study could be included in the total cost of the road improvement package.

He also told the township officials that it is legal to pass interim fees, to collect something from developers while a fee ordinance is being developed.

Ms. Caffrey noted that the township is in the midst of revising its comprehensive plan, which could lead to a revision of the zoning map, a key element in a build-out analysis. Mr. Caruso said some of the impact fee work could go on while those plans are being revised, but that the bulk would have to wait.

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