

Springdale : Aldermen table idea of raising planning submission fees

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ROGERS — Aldermen tabled a request Tuesday night to raise planning department submission fees after Mayor Steve Womack said the increase could make the city less attractive for development and squeeze out lower-cost housing.

City planners argued that reviewing plans has become so time consuming that the existing fees don't cover their costs. But home builders said the increase, along with additional fees that soon will be charged by other entities, would lead to a lack of lower-end housing.

"I'm very concerned about the escalating cost of housing in this community," Womack said. "There are too many people who work in Rogers who can't live in Rogers."

The fees would have raised large-scale development plan fees from \$ 200 to \$ 750. Rezoning requests would have jumped from \$ 200 to \$ 500. Conditional-use permit applications would have cost \$ 350, up from \$ 100.

More fees are planned for next year. Rogers Water Utilities will begin charging \$ 2, 900 on each new home next April.

Rogers is paying a Texas consultant to study impact fees, both flat-rate fees and fees determined by the size of the development. The study should be completed in December.

The combined increase in fees could make smaller cities with cheaper land costs more attractive, said Lance Johnson, a home builder and member of the Northwest Arkansas Home Builders Association.

"They're going to kill the goose that laid the golden egg if they don't quit messing around," Johnson said. "There is only so much the buying public is going to pay for government regulation."

Senior planner Derrel Smith said the fee increase is necessary to pay for infrastructure as a result of rapid development and would not affect the availability of lowercost housing.

Alderman Jim Clark said the request should be tabled until the city reviews the impact-fee study. He said he's concerned about the effects of potential impact fees and higher submission fees.

Jan Skopecek, executive director of the Northwest Arkansas Home Builders Association, said she will review the proposed fees with the association's governmental affairs committee.

"My main concern is affordable housing," Skopecek said. "Where are you going to house your firefighters, your policemen, your teachers, your city workers if you start combining all these fees?"

The average price of new and existing homes in Benton County was \$ 155, 660 in 2003. The price has risen 18 percent to \$ 183, 664 this year, according to the Rogers Board of Realtors.

Alderman Buddy Wright said the price of land drives development costs, not administrative fees.

"Obtaining affordable property is the first step to affordable housing," Wright said. "I'd rather raise them now and hope we go another seven or eight years before we raise them again."

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