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Ascension Parish tax proposal aims to ease traffic congestion

Parish plans impact fees, tax on sales

By **JOHN A. COLVIN**

River parishes bureau

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Story originally published in The Advocate

GONZALES — Two revenue-raising plans intended to relieve transportation concerns in Ascension Parish — impact fees and a proposed half-cent sales tax — are progressing through the legislative process and heading toward the Parish Council agenda.

First up is the proposed transportation impact fees, which the Parish Council is expected to handle tonight, although a final vote might come later. Councilwoman Cheryl Fontenot has indicated she thinks more time is needed for the public and the council to consider the ordinance.

Council members will hear public input on the fees as well as discuss their own concerns. The fees are the result of work by a committee of builders, developers and business leaders and described by a hired consultant as part of the solution. Parish President Ronnie Hughes has pushed for enactment of impact fees since September 2004.

Impact fees are one-time charges put on new developments to cover the cost of the increased burden the new facilities place on infrastructure. The proposed ordinance bases fees on the structural purpose — residential, retail, institutional or industrial.

Some groups publicly oppose the transportation impact fees. When the fee ordinance was introduced June 1, representatives of the Capital Region Builders' Association voiced their concerns that construction prices are too high already. Greater Baton Rouge Association of Realtors officials said they are sending e-mails to the association's Ascension Parish members urging them to attend tonight's meeting in opposition.

"Anything that artificially inflates the price is not good," said Herb Gomez, executive vice president of the association. "It unfairly puts a burden on a select few."

He added instituting the fees could force property buyers to purchase in areas without the added cost.

The Ascension Parish and Donaldsonville chambers of commerce have not adopted a stance on the fees.

Donald Songy, who takes over as Ascension Parish superintendent of schools on July 1, is behind the impact fee plan.

"It by itself won't solve the transportation needs," Songy said. "It is a part of the larger solution. It has to be a long-term plan."

Songy is a member of the group that initially studied the feasibility of the fees.

Hughes said that many ordinary citizens are also supportive of the fees.

"It is the power of the people moving this," Hughes said. "I've had a lot of people tell me to keep pushing it."

The fee ordinance does not require voter approval, but could become law if as many as eight of the 11 members of the Parish Council vote in favor of it.

The other component of a revenue-generating plan aimed at easing traffic woes in the parish is a parishwide, half-cent sales tax.

Because voters must approve the new tax, council members have said they want voters to have a list of designated projects funded

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by the tax.

The parish asked consulting engineering firm URS Corp. to develop a master transportation plan along with a corresponding list of priority projects utilizing proposed new sales tax revenues.

In a 3-1 vote Tuesday, the council's Transportation Committee cleared the way for the master plan to go before the council on July 6.

It outlines 20 projects that will be primarily funded by selling revenue bonds to be retired by a 20-year, half-cent sales tax. The construction projects would cost an estimated \$182.1 million in total — \$127.65 million in construction costs plus \$54.45 million for rights-of-way acquisition and engineering expenses.

The projected revenue from the bonds funded by a 20-year, half-cent sales tax is about \$100 million, leaving a shortfall. URS representative Tom Hunter said the planners intentionally included work about 25 percent beyond anticipated revenues to allow for some flexibility. Even with the built-in gap, the priority projects still include roughly \$55 million in project costs above potential revenue.

Revenues from the impact fees or collections from higher-than-projected sales tax income could be used to fill the shortfall, Hunter said.

Council members Kent Schexnaydre, Cheryl Fontenot and George Valentine approved sending the sales tax plan to the full council for further discussion.

Following his failed attempt to send it to the Finance Committee first, committee member Doug Hillensbeck opposed the motion because he thought the northern portion of the parish is not receiving its fair share of road construction. A fifth member, Todd Lambert, was absent from the meeting.

The revised master transportation plan puts estimated costs at \$504.16 million. It includes a \$39.64 million increase, of which \$31 million is an estimated construction figure previously unavailable and omitted. The actual changes in the plan account for the remaining difference.

The plan would also allow the council to use 10 percent of the bond revenues to supplement local road construction.

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