



Ascension chief explains fee to handle impact of growth

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ST. AMANT -- A parishwide transportation impact fee could not discriminate between developers, new Ascension Parish residents and longtime ones who build new homes, Parish President Ronnie Hughes said Monday.

The law won't allow it, he said.

"You have to be constitutional. You can't discriminate," Hughes told an audience of about 15 people at a community meeting at a St. Amant Park auditorium.

His comment came in response to 56-year-old St. Amant resident Joseph Braud and followed Hughes' discussion of the parish's 25-year-old backlog of infrastructure needs.

In office nearly two years, Hughes' administration is preparing to unveil a series of steps to deal with the parish's rapid growth. Hughes took time in this first of a series of community meetings to explain the parish's financial position and what decisions lie ahead for him, the Parish Council and the public at large.

Among them is finding a way to fund \$700 million in transportation needs that Hughes said a recent study has shown. An impact fee could be part of the answer, he said.

"And so what we have to decide as a group of citizens is what do we want to do," he said.

Two-thirds of a half-cent sales tax goes to parish roads. It generates about \$2.8 million per year and isn't enough, he said. An impact fee could generate another \$2.5 million annually that could be used as matching money for federal highway dollars, Hughes said.

Reading from past news accounts, Braud said he objects to impact fees being portrayed only as passing on the cost of growth to developers and newcomers. "Anybody that built a new house would have to pay an impact fee," Braud said.

He gave a personal example. Although he owns a house in the parish, if he subdivided his land and built a new one, he said he would have to pay the impact fee.

Hughes didn't dispute that but also said most of the impact fees would still come from new residents. He also said it gives the parish a way to pay for new growth without overtaxing itself, saying later there are "no easy answers."

"If we want services, there's no free lunch. You got to find a way to pay for it," Hughes said.

The parish is still developing its impact fee ordinance. The fees are charges levied against new developments to generate revenue for new or expanded capital improvements necessitated by new developments.

A committee reviewing an impact fee ordinance draft is slated to meet at 6 tonight at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales. The meeting will be in Banquet Room 1, on the second floor with entrance next to center's main office, 9039 St. Landry Road. Past panel discussions have included when the fee would be assessed, and therefore, who would pay it -- developer, builder or homeowner.

The draft, which is for discussion purposes only until a final document is ready for the Parish Council, calls for between \$1,489 and \$2,169 in fees per single-family home.

Henry Graham, a 55-year-old lawyer and engineer also from St. Amant, asked how fees would help St. Amant and other areas already affected by development.

He also questioned Hughes, who told the group the fees couldn't be used for the "sins of the past," whether the parish didn't need to slow its growth and use its tax base to fix old problems.

But Hughes said impact fees are one of several ways the parish is working on to address growth, such as trying to prevent abuse of family partitions.

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