[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Ascension eyes road funding

Committee, council to consider impact fees, sales tax

By JOHN A. COLVIN

River parishes bureau

Published: May 28, 2006

GONZALES — The Ascension Parish Council likely will consider a revenue-generating plan for road construction this week, parish President Ronnie Hughes said.

After months of discussion about a half-cent, parishwide sales tax and transportation impact fees on new property developments, the next phase is set for Tuesday. At a special meeting at 7 p.m. in the Ascension Parish Courthouse Annex in Gonzales, the parish's Transportation Committee is to hear suggested road projects that will be tied to the sales tax.

Project list to be offered

A consulting engineering firm, URS Corp., will present a suggested project list Tuesday night that considers goals of the state and of the Capital Region Planning Commission to ease congestion on the parish roads, particularly those used by commuters, Mike Patorno of URS said.

The Transportation Committee will adopt a version of the list and take it before the full council, possibly two days later, said committee chairwoman and Councilwoman Cheryl Fontenot.

If the sales tax, including the associated road projects, and impact fees are introduced at Thursday's council meeting in Donaldsonville, members may hold a public hearing and final vote on the measures as early as June 15 in the second council meeting of the month, Hughes said.

Five of the 11 council members said last week they are unsure how they will vote on the transportation impact fees, indicating there are still several issues to be worked out. Baton Rouge lawyer and parish consultant Charles Landry met with separate groups of the Parish Council two weeks ago to hear members' concerns. He is using notes from the meetings to create the 12th draft of the impact fee ordinance.

The impact fee is projected to generate \$100 million in 20 years. That money will be used to increase capacity capabilities, according to Hughes' estimates. Impact fees are one-time charges put on new developments based on the premise that the development should pay for the increased burden on the parish's infrastructure, in this case, roads.

The fee amount varies based on a schedule that categorizes residential, retail, institutional and industrial structures based on the anticipated extra demand put on the roads.

The 26-page draft ordinance separates the parish into three districts and creates a trust fund for each district that will be used primarily to fund road improvements or to pay off debt related to road work. Some funds will pay for consultants' fees to update the fees and to cover administrative costs.

The backing of eight members — a supermajority of the 11-member council — is needed to enact an impact

fee ordinance.

Voters to determine fate of tax

Ascension Parish voters will decide the ultimate fate of the sales tax. A simple majority, six of the 11 members, will be enough to send a half-cent sales tax proposal to the voters. When asked, seven council members said they would vote to put the proposal on the ballot.

The timetable for the tax proposal is tight because Hughes wants the tax proposition placed on the Sept. 30 election ballot. The deadline is July 21 to get an issue on the ballot.

An analysis using past parish school tax collections reveals that revenues increased at an average annual rate of 4.19 percent in the past 10 years.

In the past decade, the parish experienced a surge in industrial capital investment from 1997 to 2001 followed by a significant drop in 2002, said Mark West, administrator of the Ascension Parish Sales and Use Tax Authority. The tax revenues are surging again because of a population increases after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

An analysis using the historical average rate of increase, which reflects the ups and downs, as a predictor of future tax collections indicates the half-cent sales tax could yield about \$104.6 million in the next 10 years.

URS Corp. is developing the project list following a meeting May 17 with about 25 officials from several parish and municipal governments chipping in with their thoughts.

URS engineer Tom Hunter told the group that Ascension Parish's road infrastructure is unable to meet the needs of parish with a population that has ballooned 135 percent since 1980.

"If you look at the whole parish, the network is made of rural, two-lane highways," he said. "That was fine before when it was a rural parish."

Hughes believes the parish will continue to see increases in sales tax revenues and the tax sources will be more diverse, he told council members last week.

Based on Hunter's statement during the stakeholders' meeting, the parish will need between \$300 million and \$400 million in the next 25 years to meet transportation infrastructure demands if the trends continue in Ascension.

Ascension Parish spent \$71 million on roads since 1996 and the state shelled out \$22 million in the past four years, but the majority of the funds were used for overlay and other maintenance, Hunter said.

Few projects dealt with the traffic volume associated with the emergence of Ascension as a suburban area and trend toward urban growth, he said.

New tax, if passed, would be 9%

If the new tax clears the Parish Council and is approved by voters, the parish sales tax rate will be 9 percent. For a real-life example, \$100 in groceries will yield \$9 in taxes — \$5 will go to local taxing bodies.

Under the current Ascension Parish tax structure, the state collects 4 percent and only the Ascension Parish School Board collects a parishwide tax — 2 percent. In unincorporated areas, the Ascension Parish government collects 1 percent and the Sheriff's Office gets a half-cent. Gonzales, Donaldsonville and Sorrento collect 2 percent within their boundaries.

The East Ascension Drainage District, which includes all territory east of the Mississippi River, maintains a

half-cent sales tax as does the West Ascension Hospital, which covers the other side of the river.

The parish collects another half percent in taxes — two-thirds of which is dedicated to road construction and the remaining is spent for fire protection services.

Sales tax revenue accounts for about 53 percent of the parish's budget.

Ascension reviews proposed road projects

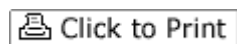
The Ascension Parish Council is considering a list of major road projects to improve traffic capacity that will be tied to a half-cent sales tax proposal. The following is a listing of roadways, intersections and other transportation issues discussed during a May 17 workshop between consultants and parish and municipal officials.

- Turn lanes at La. 308, La. 1 and La. 3089 in Donaldsonville.
- La. 3127 extension and four-laning of La. 3089.
- Widen and add shoulders to La. 930 especially by Prairieville school.
- La. 621 at Duplessis Elementary School, Central School at Roddy Road, St. Amant High and Oak Grove on La. 73.
- Addition of third lane to La. 73 all the way to East Baton Rouge Parish line.
- Large problems with fire response on La. 22, La. 73, La. 74, La. 42 during peak traffic times (average 12-15 EMS calls per day).
- Service roads along Interstate 10 to spur development.
- Connection with a Baton Rouge loop.
- Initiatives on a railway between Baton Rouge and New Orleans with stations in Ascension.
- La. 22 at I-10 is a severe bottleneck and La. 70 needs to be widened to four-lanes.
- La. 431 needs widening and shoulders.
- Major accident intersections include La. 70 at La. 22; La. 621 at U.S. 61; La. 431 at Black Bayou and Goldplace; and La. 44 at Black Bayou.
- Construction of a right-turn lane at La. 621 and U.S. 61.
- Initiative to ease congestion at every intersection of La. 42 and La. 73.
- Extend La. 74 to La. 44 with the placement of an I-10 interchange.
- U.S. 61 needs overpasses instead of intersections at all highway crossings,
- Bridge on La. 621 at Duplessis needs to be raised.

To share thoughts on the issue, residents may contact their Parish Council member or the parish administrative office at (225) 621-5709.

Find this article at:

<http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/2886651.html?showAll=y>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

