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Ascension fund plan labeled political ploy

Proposal's author seeks to attract business to area

By JOHN COLVIN
Advocate staff writer
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A push toward creating an economic development fund in Ascension Parish irritated at least two Parish Council members this past week.

On June 26, Councilman Kent Schexnaydre followed through on a promise to pursue the fund's creation. He first floated the idea when the council was considering imposing transportation impact fees. The fund would be used to

entice industrial development by offsetting some or all of the development's fees.

"It might be a decision-maker for some companies," Schexnaydre said. "I think it is important for economic development."

The issue was raised during the Strategic Planning Committee meeting. The members reached a consensus, agreeing that the fund should first be discussed with the Finance Committee.

However, Councilwoman Cheryl Fontenot said the true intent behind the fund is to entice Councilman Jared Beiriger to change his vote on the proposed impact fees.

"I don't know if I can say it is a bribe or not, but I can say it is politics as usual," she said Tuesday afternoon.

The transportation impact fee proposal missed being adopted by a one-vote margin at the council's June 15 meeting.

On a voice vote, the proposition failed 7-4, one vote shy of the needed two-thirds majority.

Impact fees are one-time charges on new developments to cover the cost of the anticipated extra burden placed on the parish's road system. The fees vary with the structure's purpose — residential, retail, institutional and industrial — and size.

Beiriger, who voted against the impact fee proposal, agreed with her assessment, saying he told the administration that his support depends on the inclusion of a spending plan and an economic development fund.

Even if the fund is created and a spending plan included, he does not think he would vote in favor of the fees because the fee proponents are trying to do it after the fact, he said.

Parish President Ronnie Hughes spoke in favor of the fund and the fees.

"Ascension Parish is not a sustainable community," he told the committee members. "It is irresponsible to continue growth and development without doing something."

Fontenot said the practice of paying fees for some companies would be unfair.

"I don't think ordinary citizens should have to fund select businesses while our mom-and-pop stores have to pay," she said. "We need to create a business-friendly community. This isn't how you do it."

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