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Austin takes another look at how it pays for parks

Plan would extend parks fee to condo, apartment projects.

By Sarah Coppola
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For two decades, the City of Austin has collected a park fee from every subdivision built. It has gathered \$9.1 million to create or improve parks near the new homes.

But the collection and spending of the money has not been uniform, and park advocates are asking city leaders to revisit the fee.

- About \$3.6 million — 40 percent — of the fees collected since 1985 has not been spent. (This year the parks department has budgeted \$5.2 million for park projects — \$1.4 million from the park fee and the rest from bond money and the city's general fund.)

- Most apartment complexes and the tall condo projects being built downtown don't have to pay the fee. The city is missing out on millions of dollars it could use to create the quality urban parks that an increasingly packed downtown will need, park advocates say.

- The fee amounts collected and spent on different parts of town vary considerably. The most money has been gathered and spent on Northwest Austin parks; the least, on Northeast Austin parks.

- Some park activists question whether developers' providing affordable housing should take precedence over paying for parks.

The Parks and Recreation Department wants to apply the fee to all residential projects and

increase it from an average of \$518 to \$650 per housing unit.

Parks board chairwoman Linda Guerrero said those changes would finally close a loophole that has prevented areas full of apartments and condos from getting deserved park improvements. The fee should still be used as it always has, she said — to improve a park nearest the development paying the fee — because residents of a new development will use and strain the parks nearby.

Downtown developers are skeptical of the calls for change, arguing that the city should be paying for park improvements from its property tax revenue, to which they contribute already.

"Instead of looking at the situation broadly, they're looking for ways to get some big, quick money," said Perry Lorenz, a developer and downtown commission member.

Assistant parks director Stuart Strong said the city earmarks the fees for specific parks but often waits years to gather enough money to pay for big projects.

Since 1985, the biggest amounts have been spent on Zilker Park (\$623,397 for land), Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park (\$566,568 for new playground equipment and two lighted ball fields) and the Onion Creek soccer complex (\$572,815 for nine new soccer fields, parking and a detention pond).

The largest amounts yet to be spent are earmarked for Circle C Ranch Metropolitan Park, Pickfair Park, Rosewood Park, Scofield Farms Park and Walnut Creek Metropolitan Park.

Strong said the city will use the Circle C park money to build projects — a trail, parking, irrigation and playscapes — that are still being designed. The Scofield Farms park fees will help pay for a hike-and-bike trail extension, but the city hasn't acquired the land yet, he said. The Walnut Creek and Pickfair fees will pay for projects (a three-mile trail extension and a restroom renovation) that are being designed. The historical Rosewood recreation center will be revamped with fee money, but the project has not been scheduled, Strong said.

Rosewood resident Jane Rivera said she'd prefer the money be used to begin renovating a bathroom and dressing room at another neighborhood park, Downs Mabson Fields.

"If the money gets left sitting there, someone will figure out another way to use it" for a purpose unrelated to parks, she said.

Right now, only developers seeking to subdivide land (usually for single-family homes, not condos or apartments) have to pay for green space. They can buy 5 acres of nearby parkland for every 1,000 subdivision residents or pay the park fee, which is based on the assessed value of the land.

Most developers pay the fee. Many subdivisions are small, so the land they'd be required to set aside would be too small for a new park, Strong said. Beyond the \$9.1 million, the parks department has collected \$1.1 million in park fees that it has not yet been authorized by the City Council to spend.

The money can be used for capital projects such as new trails and playscapes but not on park maintenance or employees. Strong said the city rarely buys parkland with the fees because land is costlier than improvements, and there is usually a park nearby to revamp.

City Council Member Mike Martinez said the city should consider spending the money on parks citywide, not just near fee-paying developments.

"We have a \$4 million surplus (of park fees), yet we have parks in East Austin that are undeveloped — Guerrero Park, Gus Garcia Park," he said. "They might never be able to dip into those funds because they don't fall in the geographic boundary" of new growth.

The fee should stay an "impact fee" that offsets the effects of new residents on an area, parks board member Jeff Francell said. An influx of downtown dwellers will strain urban parks, so downtown condo projects should pay to help revamp those parks, he said.

Several downtown green spaces need a face lift, such as Wooldridge Square and Republic Square, and the park fee could be a steady source of money beyond infrequent bond elections, Francell said.

Vibrant urban green spaces will also meet city leaders' goal of attracting more downtown residents, parks board member Mark Vane said.

Austin's current park fee is unfair because it is based on land value rather housing units, Strong said. Developers building on costlier land pay more in fees even if they house fewer residents who won't burden nearby parks, he said. That's why the department is suggesting a flat fee of \$650 for every housing unit, Strong said.

Corpus Christi charges \$200 per unit; Cedar Park, \$720; and Portland, Ore., \$1,986 to \$3,053, according to a study by Austin's parks department.

El Paso charges a high fee — \$1,370 — to encourage developers to choose the alternative option of building their own park, said El Paso's assistant parks director, Barry Russell. That city must spend the fees within three years. In Austin, developers can request the money back if it isn't used within five years, but Strong said he can't remember a developer doing that.

The fee should be based on the square footage in a project, not each unit, said Charlie Betts,

executive director of the Downtown Austin Alliance. A big suburban house with a large family that will use a nearby park should pay a bigger fee than a small downtown condo with one resident, he said.

Without a formal fee in place, some downtown developers have been offering money for parks as they seek extra height or square footage on projects. Developers of the Concordia University redevelopment recently agreed to give \$700,000 to the Austin Parks Foundation.

A fair compromise would be charging per unit for single-family homes and per square foot for condos and apartments, planning commission member Chris Riley said.

A citizens task force recently recommended that any project that includes affordable housing (in exchange for extra height or square footage) should be exempted from the park fee.

Parks are important, too, so only the affordable units — not the whole project — should be exempt, downtown commission member Jeb Boyt said.

Developer Robert Barnstone said he worries that extra fees will slow downtown development just as it's gaining steam.

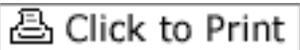
He said he'd want assurances that the money would be spent in a timely way, on parks near the developments giving it.

"Sometimes city fees seem to disappear into the morass," Barnstone said.

scoppola@statesman.com; 912-2939

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