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Bartow Gives Preliminary OK To Raising Fees on New Homes

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BARTOW -- The cost of a new home in Bartow is about to swell by an average \$1,400.

City commissioners gave preliminary approval Monday night to a fee on new construction to offset costs related to the city's parks and recreation programs.

It's like an impact fee, said City Manager Joe DeLegge, but it covers money the city has already spent.

"When we did a study on impact fees, we found out that we had enough parks and recreation facilities to last us through 2025," he said. "That includes the projected growth during that period. Basically, we've overbuilt."

In most cases, cities impose impact fees to cover future expenses related to growth as it comes. In Bartow's case, the parks and recreation facilities are in place, so the city needs to recoup the cost of what's already there.

In his impact fee study, Tampa consultant Gene Boles estimated the replacement cost of the city's 13 parks and three recreation centers at \$38 million.

Based on that value, Boles drafted a fee schedule for new homes. The average house, totaling 2,000 to 3,599 square feet, carries a parks and recreation fee of \$1,459.

"That goes directly into the general fund now," DeLegge said. "Impact fees have to be put into a reserve account for future spending, but this fee recoups the city for money already spent, so it can go straight into the budget."

If commissioners give final approval to the proposal later this month and the fee becomes effective Oct. 1, city administrators have projected that it will generate about \$133,000 in new revenue next year.

"As tight as the budget is, we're having to become more creative in generating new revenue," DeLegge said.

Bartow is hardly the first Polk County city to collect fees on new construction for parks and recreation facilities.

Auburndale, Dundee, Frostproof, Haines City, Lakeland and Lake Wales already collect similar

fees ranging from \$195 to \$945 per house. At \$1,459, Bartow's will be the highest, according to the city's impact fee study.

In recent years, Bartow has seen a burst in new home construction, and builders say this fee, on its own, shouldn't stem that tide.

"It's not going to hurt development, but the cumulative fees will have the cascading effect of pricing people out of the new housing market," said George Lindsey, vice president of development for Highland Homes, which is building homes in the 330-lot Windmeadows community in northwest Bartow. "It becomes harder for people to reach that first rung on the home ownership ladder."

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