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Bellingham to consider allowing discounts on traffic impact fees

JARED PABEN

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BELLINGHAM - The transit authority, anti-sprawl group Futurewise and Associated General Contractors of Washington are all applauding a draft law that would give developers discounts on transportation fees if they meet certain conditions.

The City Council on Monday, Dec. 6, will hold a hearing and consider the law, which would offer discounts of up to 50 percent for projects located in urban villages and for developers who take steps to reduce traffic impacts.

The city charges fees to developers for each evening rush-hour trip their projects are expected to generate. The money helps pay for transportation improvements that serve new development.

The fees can add substantially to the costs of building. In 2010, the fee is \$1,932 for each car their project adds to the evening rush-hour traffic. In a separate vote Monday, the council will consider setting the 2011 fee at \$1,927.

Under the draft law, developers could earn the following discounts (with a maximum of 50 percent):

- **Urban village area:** They automatically get a 15 percent discount for building in one of the following urban villages: downtown, Fairhaven, Old Town, Samish Way, Fountain District or Barkley Village.
- **Proximity to transit:** They get various discounts depending on how close to a transit line they are, as well as the type of transit line. The discounts range from 2 percent to 10 percent. Beyond a quarter mile from a transit line, considered a reasonable walking distance, no discount is offered.
- **Buying bus passes:** For each two-year bus pass they provide for each employee or home in the project, they get a 1 percent discount.
- **Trip-reduction plans:** Large businesses required by state law to participate in a commute trip reduction plan (those with 100 or more employees) get a 10 percent break in the fee.
- **Car-share participation:** They can get 2 percent discounts for helping participation in car-share programs (Bellingham currently doesn't have one).

Whatcom Transportation Authority and the city have worked together for years to accomplish shared transportation goals, including increasing transit-friendly development, increasing density in mixed-use urban villages and getting residents to drive less and take more alternative transportation, WTA General Manager Richard Walsh wrote to the city.

"WTA recognizes the (transportation impact fee) amendment as an important step toward achieving these goals," he wrote.

The local chapter of statewide group Futurewise also supports the changes. While Bellingham has transportation impact fees, Whatcom County doesn't, and that encourages growth outside cities and on rural land, chapter director Cathy Lehman wrote to the city.

"(The proposed law) incentivizes smart growth alternatives to sprawling, expensive development patterns, and makes it easier for the right kind of development to occur," she wrote.

Associated General Contractors of Washington supports what it called good policy to spur growth in urban villages.

"In the current economic downturn, it is going to take deep incentives to ensure developers see the value of building within the framework of smart growth principles," Liz Evans, AGC northern district manager, wrote to the city.

Planners are asking the council to take its first vote on the law after the hearing. That way the council could take its final vote at the Dec. 13 meeting and it could go into effect before Jan. 1. That's also when the new fee amount would go into effect.

ATTEND THE HEARING

What: Bellingham City Council hearing on a draft law allowing transportation fee discounts of up to 50 percent for developers building in some urban areas and taking certain steps to reduce their projects' traffic impacts.

When: 7 p.m. Monday, Dec. 6.

Where: City Council Chambers, 210 Lottie St.

More information: Go to [the City Council's online agenda packet](#), click on the Dec. 6 agenda and then click on "AB19041."



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