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Opinion - Tuesday, June 7, 2005

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Bigger impact fee would allow Hall to spruce up parks

Our views

OPINION

The Hall County Board of Commissioners soon will be holding public hearings on increasing residential impact fees. That is the amount charged to property owners for their proportional share of public facilities needed to serve new development. If approved, the current fee on new houses would go from \$652 to \$1,242.

When Hall County impact fees were proposed about 18 months ago, opponents said it would scare away new development, yet building has continued as usual. The fee currently brings in about \$100,000 a month.

The primary portion of the proposed fee will go to the Hall County Parks and Recreation Department, an increase from \$311.44 to \$815.47. The remainder will go to fund the library, detention center, fire services and sheriff's office.

If someone thinks \$1,242 is an unreasonable amount, they can compare it to the impact fees in other North Georgia counties. According to a Ross & Associates study, Dawson County is proposing to raise its residential impact fee to \$1,865. Cherokee County, which often is compared to Hall, already has a residential impact fee of \$1,832, but part of that money also goes to roads. The city of Jefferson has an impact fee of \$1,293 to serve only the library and parks.

If comparing Hall to other governments, it would be best not to include park services because Hall ranks far behind. Recommendations for parks improvements in 1999 still have not been accomplished.

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Just think about such niceties as restrooms for all Hall County parks. How about a sprayground (water fountains) with a rubber surface for kids ages 2 to 8? Four spraygrounds were proposed for 2004, but they didn't happen. The only thing more fun for a child than running through spraying water is a swimming pool, and a pool for a South Hall park is in the new plan.

Just to meet the lowest national standards in 2004, Hall County needed to add 11 ball fields and 11 soccer fields. Just think how nice it would be to have security lights and proper signage at all the parks we already have.

Park and recreation services do more than provide a place for play and physical exercise. They improve the quality and aesthetic value of the environment, attract new business and contribute to the economy.

The most immediate projects on the current plan are to acquire land for a South Hall community park; acquire land for a northwest community park; develop the South Hall park; and build community centers at Laurel Park, East Hall and South Hall.

These projects will be costly, and needless to say, the proposed impact fees still would supply only a small portion of the funds. But these parks are needed and the longer it takes to accomplish these parks, the higher the cost will be. Impact fees are fair and provide money that doesn't have to come from elsewhere.

The commission will be announcing hearing dates in the next weeks. We hope that people who go out to comment will attempt to be fully informed on the valuable consequences of this hike in fees for new residences.

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