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Boost to city's drainage may be up to voters

Initiative that could appear on November ballot calls for monthly fee

By **BRADLEY OLSON**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
 July 8, 2010, 10:20PM

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WHO PAYS?

Renew Houston is seeking voter approval for a 20-year, \$8 billion plan to shore up the city's infrastructure and significantly reduce flooding problems. Money for the plan would come from three sources:

'Stormwater User Fee': Expected to be about \$5 per month for an average homeowner and \$90 a month for an average commercial property owner.

'Development Impact Fee': Developers have to pay for the degree to which their projects impact density.

'Pay-as-you-go' plan: Would take the estimated one-sixth of total city property tax revenues used now to pay for interest costs on debt that has financed infrastructure and drainage projects and apply it directly to new projects. In other words, the city would not incur additional debt to pay for infrastructure as part of the plan and as old debts are paid off, money used to make those payments

Voters in November likely will be asked to tax themselves for better drainage and infrastructure and to possibly ban red-light cameras and alter term limits.

Renew Houston, a group of influential local engineers, has collected more than 30,000 signatures in a push to seek voter approval for an \$8 billion initiative — and a monthly drainage fee - to better prevent flooding across the city.

For an average Houston homeowner with a 5,000-square-foot lot and a 2,500-square-foot home, the fee would be about \$5 a month.

The signatures were submitted to the city secretary Thursday. If they are validated, a process that is expected to take several weeks, the proposal will be put to voters in the form of an amendment to the city charter on the Nov. 2 ballot.

If approved, the charter amendment would create a "Dedicated Drainage and Street Renewal Fund" through 2032 that would pay for infrastructure projects to reduce flooding and repair streets without the additional use of debt.

"On days like today, I think it's obvious why we need some improvements," said Allen Watson, an engineer and board member of the Metropolitan Transit Authority who is involved in the campaign. He was referring to the street flooding that has enveloped various parts of the city amid heavy rainfall in the past week. "It's obvious why we need some improvements. The drainage systems are old."

Critics point out that engineers involved in educating voters and bankrolling the drainage campaign stand to make money on projects that the referendum would pay for if it passes. Engineers have countered that they are best suited to educate the public about the problem, just as doctors may educate people about a problem they can make money treating.

Norman Adams, an activist who was among the leaders of a successful fight against a scuttled drainage fee plan during the Lee Brown administration, said voters are likely to reject such a "rain tax" in this political climate.

"Voters will see this as an additional property tax, and voters are so upset with property taxes now that it will be absolutely opposed," he said.

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would be put to drainage and infrastructure projects.

Source: Renew Houston

Red-light camera fight

The drainage referendum is the first of three major charter amendment propositions that various interest groups hope will make the November ballot.

The other two include a proposal to ban the use of red-light cameras in Houston and a move to change the three two-year terms to which elected officials are limited in the city.

The anti-red-light-camera effort is being led by Paul Kubosh, a lawyer who is seeking signatures to put the measure on the ballot by contacting his former clients, thousands of whom received tickets for moving violations in the city. Kubosh said Thursday that he has 22,000 signatures - the number needed to get a charter amendment on the ballot - but is in the process of verifying that they are registered voters, as required by law.

The term-limits proposal is being handled by a commission set up by former Mayor Bill White. The commission is expected to have its final meeting on Monday, when it will finalize its recommendations for changing term limits and forward a report to City Council. According to the ordinance setting up the commission, the council will have the ability to vote on whether to put the commission's recommendations to voters. Committee members say the most likely outcome is a recommendation to move to two four-year terms, although they have cautioned that plans could change up until their final meeting.

Mayor backs referendum

Mayor Annise Parker said she supports the drainage referendum, which has been prepared independently from her office. She said in a news conference Wednesday that the city lacks the funds necessary to do all the infrastructure work needed to take care of Houston's flooding problems.

If approved by voters, the proposal would pay for projects to repair streets and mitigate flooding with revenues from a new fee charged to businesses, homeowners and developers, as well as a portion of property tax money currently being used to pay off debt associated with infrastructure projects. In other words, the city would not incur additional debt to pay for infrastructure as part of the plan and as old debts are paid off, money used to make those payments would be put toward drainage and infrastructure projects.

The proposed referendum includes a provision that would continue the program for another 20 years after 2032 unless the City Council votes to modify or cancel it.

bradley.olson@chron.com

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getrealfolks wrote:

I'm sorry, but this problem has been created by the developers in and around the Houston area and THEY should be footing the entire bill as a cost of doing business in Houston. My property hasn't changed in the 30 years since it was built. It doesn't create any more runoff then it did 25 years ago. WHY should I pay for a problem created by someone else??? Make the people responsible pay for their own problems. You shouldn't be able to build anything unless, you are willing to pay for the infrastructure changes needed to support the project. But hey the old crony system is still alive and well in Houston.

7/9/2010 2:53:00 AM

Recommend: (56) (11)

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grthac wrote:

Another fee, another way to collect money in which our County and City should be doing within their budget. When the fee is not enough, tack on another 5 dollars. In a few years, it'll be \$20/month. Enough is enough. Cities and Counties should be working with the Flood District for future planning.

The mayor states, "...the city lacks the funds necessary to do all the infrastructure work needed to take care of Houston's flooding problems."

What the City lacks is financial accountability.

7/9/2010 1:54:25 AM

Recommend: (53) (12)

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houstonmat wrote:

The referendum needs to include some commitments to specific goals, such as percentage increase in drainage capacity, upstream retention, etc. Without goals and data, we're left with "we spent fewer dollars over the last 20 years" as the only measure of success, which to me would be total failure.

7/9/2010 12:47:39 AM

Recommend: (48) (3)

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forward wrote:

I smell "conflict of interest" all over this one.

If it is such a great idea, why will no one accept responsibility for it. Check the "Renew Houston" Website, and you won't find a name on it. I also would be ashamed to have my name associated with it, because it is just a disguised tax increase meant to rip off Houstonians.

Vote NO!

7/9/2010 3:44:08 AM

Recommend: (42) (11)

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no-dawg wrote:

Nickle dime us till we move or elect REAL people. I do love Houston but it comes a time to say goodbye.

7/9/2010 2:24:11 AM

Recommend: (33) (9)

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skippy4343 wrote:

How about collecting a fine from illegal aliens to pay all of this? They need to pay SOMETHING and THEY use LOTS of sewage.

7/9/2010 12:50:54 PM

Recommend: (0) (0)

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KitandKaboodle wrote:

My neighborhood has been in Houston since the 1940's and until 2001 had never flooded. As someone who can now never get to their house if it rains heavily and whose home has been flooded twice in the last 10 years because the city has not corrected/maintained drainage problems or overseen development in the area very well, I will vote YES on the drainage thing.

7/9/2010 12:22:22 PM

(36)

Recommend: (0) (0)

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gottovote wrote:

Hello, everybody. Houston is pretty much flat as a place can be. The rain comes down where and as it comes down and has to be stored somewhere until it can drain off. This is true whether it rains in Sunnyside or the Medical Center or Spring Branch or wherever. If 4 inches falls in the Medical Center there will be street flooding until the rain lets up and the water can drain.

Maybe a drainage system can be devised for one area deemed critically important, but there is absolutely NO WAY to fix the problem everywhere.

Street Storage is what we have and will have. No "special tax" will make things better. It will only cost everybody more, and the City will waste the money anyway.

I wonder why Houston has so many potholes? The answer is because money was wasted elsewhere instead of fixing what actually can be fixed.

7/9/2010 11:26:25 AM

(24)

Recommend: (1) (1)

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yonny wrote:

Now you will see what a 'slush fund' actually is.

Here comes another ballot with a load of bond issues and initiatives that the majority of voters will just punch YES and leave the booth. Then when the realization hits that it costs them money the scream from the masses of 'when did they do that' will fly. Please pay attention when you vote and be aware of what is on the ballot. As a rule most bond issues and such will come up on off year election cycles and pass with a large majority of a rather low turnout.

7/9/2010 11:11:35 AM

(26)

Recommend: (2) (0)

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SamSanchez wrote:

@Jeterman5000 It costs citizens absolutely no money to maintain red light camera systems, as a former TxDOT employee and I can attest to that. The city pays for the camera systems operation out of the fines collected. Half of all revenue from collected fines are mandated by Texas law to be put into drivers safety programs and various healthcare programs. The remainder goes into paying for the systems.

7/9/2010 10:50:39 AM

(0)

Recommend: (2) (0)

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