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June 28, 2005

Build in the city, pay a new fee

Santa Cruz says traffic charge sorely needed

By SHANNA MCCORD

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Developers looking to build in the city should be ready to shell out big bucks to help pay for traffic signals, wider streets, medians and turn lanes.

City leaders are crafting a plan to put the financial burden on new development to help alleviate congestion connected to more cars on the roads.

Traffic impact fees are a popular revenue-generating practice across the county and state. For years, Watsonville, Scotts Valley and Santa Cruz County have levied the fees on all new projects — homes, apartment buildings, grocery stores, shops, schools and hotels. Capitola doesn't charge such a fee.

"Traffic impact fees are fees on new development to pay for the new car trips that the development generates," said Chris Schneider of the city Public Works Department. "I think new development should be paying its fair share."

Santa Cruz has considered the fee off and on during the past 18 years, but other projects and catastrophes have prevented its implementation.

"We've been missing the boat on this for a long time," Mayor Mike Rotkin said. "This will fix the problems caused by particular development."

Last year, the City Council approved traffic impact fees of \$106 per new car trip for new projects in the beach area.

Up for consideration at today's council meeting is \$342 per new car trip charged to new projects citywide, in addition to a reduced beach area fee of \$77 per new car trip.

Car trips are defined as the number of cars that go to and from a

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particular location daily.

For example, a new single-family home, which city officials say would bring 10 new car trips a day, would cost the developer about \$3,420.

Other examples of the fees: \$34,200 for a new restaurant that adds 100 new car trips per day; about \$3,420 for each new hotel room; \$6,800 for an office; and nearly \$100,000 for a convenience market of 1,000 square feet of floor space.

The Safeway expansion project on Mission Street would be required to pay \$500,000 in traffic impact fees, Schneiter said.

The company has written a letter to the city, saying the fee "has come as a recent surprise to us and was not budgeted into the project."

Safeway real estate manager Natalie Mattei said the traffic impact fees could make the company "reevaluate the viability of the project."

Schneiter said the city bases its number of car trips generated per project from nationwide studies and averages.

"I think we're overdue for this or something very much like it," Councilman Ed Porter said. "I think it's something we need to do."

Norman Schwartz of Bolton Hill, a Santa Cruz-based development company that built apartment complexes on Pacific Avenue and Shaffer Road, said the fees are the price of doing business in California since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 that put a cap on property tax rates.

"It's one of the few remaining ways to finances these traffic improvements," Schwartz said.

Watsonville, which started charging the fee in 1983, collects \$130 per car trip. The city has used the money to pay for much-needed bridges over the Watsonville and Struve sloughs.

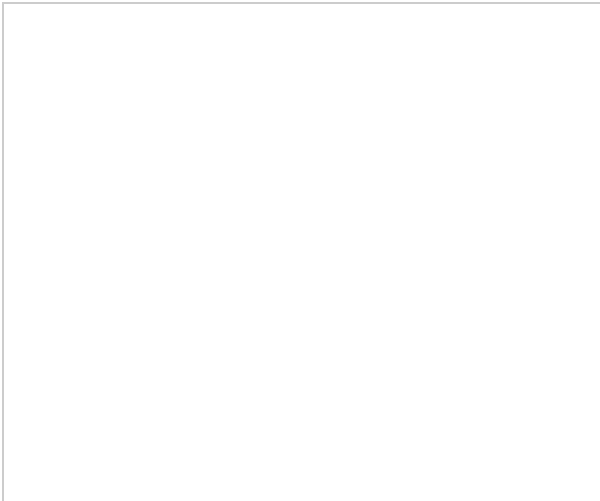
"We're getting bridges built and signals funded," city principal engineer Maria Rodriguez said. "Those are huge."

Santa Cruz has charged traffic fees on some projects in the past, but never in a "systematic way," Rotkin said.

The Santa Cruz City Council will consider the fees at its 3 p.m. meeting today.

Contact Shanna McCord at smccord@santacruzsentinel.com.

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Traffic impact fees charged to new development are used to address congestion connected to more cars on the roads. The six most-crowded local intersections, according to the city:

- Western Drive/High Street.

Seabright Avenue/Water Street.

Miramar Drive/Mission Street.

Cedar/Laurel Street.

Seabright Avenue/Murray Street.

River Street/Highway 1.

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