

CS transportation fee to be on ballot

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Published Wednesday, October 20, 2010 12:03 AM

College Station residents are being asked to vote on a transportation user fee on the Nov. 2 ballot that could raise nearly \$1 million a year for road repairs.

If approved, the measure would add a \$2-per-residence fee to monthly utility bills. For businesses, the cost would be \$1 per 1,000 square feet. The city would be the third in Texas -- joining Austin and Bryan -- to implement such a fee, which would be used to pay for repairs to 10 percent of the city's streets each year.

The City Council voted 4 to 2 to place the item on the ballot, with Mayor Nancy Berry and Councilman Jess Fields both saying money for street repairs should come from the general fund budget.

Public Works Director Chuck Gilman said the wording of the ballot measure ensures money generated from the fee can only go toward the rehabilitation of the city's transportation system. The fund cannot be used for routine maintenance, he said.

If the fee isn't approved, Gilman said, the city will have to find money to repair the streets from somewhere.

"The need will be there, but there will just not be a dedicated funding source," he said.

Councilman Dennis Maloney said the city decided in 1999 to revamp 10 percent of its roads each year. The move was intended to decrease the need to issue bonds for road repairs. But when budget cuts are needed, the road rehabilitation program is an easy target, he said. The city now only includes 6 percents of its roads in the program each year, he said.

"Without the fee, the council will have to raise the property tax rate by two cents to cover the cost of rehabilitating 10 percent of our roads," he said. "This is unlikely, and the end result will be that the roads in College Station will continue to deteriorate, forcing the city to pass more bonds to fix the roads, thus increasing the property taxes."

If approved, the transportation fee can't be increased without voter approval, and it will be indexed for inflation over three years.

Fields said he doesn't support new fees because they are difficult to reverse. The councilman said there are other options for paying for street repairs, including using money budgeted for economic development projects.

"The easiest way to raise revenue in the short term, and even in the mid-term ... is just to sell some of the land the city owns," he said. "We have to make sure if we hold land it has a specific purpose. We shouldn't be holding onto land as an investment."

Councilman Dave Ruesink said he would be in favor of reallocating money to pay for street rehabilitation, if only the money was available. With the tight budget, everything has been stretched to the limit, he said.

"I don't think our general fund could be used at this point without cutting our services somewhere," he said.

ON THE BALLOT

College Station voters will decide on a transportation user fee that would create a special fund for street rehabilitation. The money would not be used for general street maintenance.

The Nov. 2 election also includes a race for Place 5 on the College Station City Council. Jana McMillan and John Nichols are competing to complete the term of Larry Steward, who died in June. The seat is up for a full three-year term in the May election.

Early voting began Monday and continues through Oct. 29.

For more information, visit www.brazosvotes.org or cstx.gov/elections.