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Carroll County

Higher fees for new houses would be legal, report says

Figure could be doubled on single-family homes

By Mary Gail Hare

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A report shows that Carroll County could legally double the fees it charges for building a new single-family home and add nearly \$4,000 to the cost of a new townhouse.

According to the draft Impact Fee Study and Analysis, delivered to the county commissioners yesterday, the maximum justifiable amount for a new detached house could be \$13,745. The fee is now \$6,836. The buyer of a new townhouse pays a \$7,610 impact fee today, but that charge could rise to \$11,510.

Impact fees pay for additional classrooms needed because of residential growth, and for parks and recreational services.

The study, prepared by Tischler & Associates of Bethesda, reviews the present fee structure, details the justification for increasing the fees to the maximum allowable amount and adds several categories that could benefit from the funds.

The draft recommends using the revenue to build more senior centers, libraries and other amenities.

"This does not represent staff recommendations at this time," said Steven C. Horn, county director of planning. "It is just the first step in moving toward our recommendation."

Carroll's residential growth in the past 15 years has crowded schools, congested roads, and burdened emergency services and public utilities. Impact fees have helped fund new schools and parks, but they cannot pay for installing air conditioning in an existing school or remodeling it, nor can they pay to maintain ball fields and parks, officials said.

"This money is for new construction only - and only if it is attributable to growth," said Commissioner Dean L. Minnich. "We can spend this money to build a new school but not to upgrade an old school."

The fees can also pay for capital improvements but not roads, officials said.

"The lion's share of our needs are on state roads," Horn said. "We cannot charge a fee for roads when we cannot guarantee construction."

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The county must be able to legally defend its assessment of impact fees and to justify how it uses the money, said Steven D. Powell, the commissioners' chief of staff.

"If you don't have jurisdiction over infrastructure, it is difficult to charge a fee," Powell said. "State roads crisscross the county, and the state is responsible for maintenance of these roads."

The county has scheduled workshops at 7 p.m. Feb. 22 and March 1 at the Westminster Senior Center. The sessions should "get interested parties involved in an understanding of how these numbers were crafted," Horn said. A public hearing will be set at a later date.

"We will review the methods for calculating the fees at the workshops but not the philosophy behind them," Horn said. "By the time we get to the public hearing, we will talk about the fees themselves."

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