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City Council says impact fees OK

By RICK LAVENDER
The Times

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The first of two public hearings on adding impact fees in Gainesville is expected next month, with City Council's final vote possible in early August.

Council members sounded agreeable with the charges aimed at helping pay for growth, following a presentation Thursday by planning director Kip Padgett and consultant Jerry Weitz.

"I'm pleased we're going forward with this," Ruth Bruner said of the initiative, which has been in the works for months.

Councilman George Wangemann told Padgett the presentation at council's work session "defused any argument I was ready to throw at you."

A first hearing and vote could come July 18, with a second hearing and deciding vote at the following council meeting Aug. 1.

The Gainesville fees target police, fire, and parks and recreation, and can be spent only on capital improvements in those areas, such as for new parks or police stations. The city already collects Hall County impact fees for libraries and the jail, services the county provides.

The program recommended by Weitz and approved by planning staff and an advisory committee includes:

- Charges of nearly \$1,282 for a new home, apartment or other dwelling unit, plus \$196.16 per 1,000 square feet of office

Fees at a glance

Gainesville City Council is considering the following impact fees for public safety and parks and recreation*:

- Per dwelling unit: \$1,281.95
- Per 1,000 square feet: Office, \$196.16; commercial, \$107.70; industrial, \$99.86.

Including Hall County impact fees, the totals will be:

- Per dwelling unit: \$1,615.85.
- Per 1,000 square feet: Office, \$279.58; commercial, \$149.71; industrial, \$157.92.
- What's next: Public hearings and City Council votes possibly July 18 and Aug. 1.

- Contact: city manager's office, (770) 535-6865

*No fee charged on home additions. Totals do not include a proposed 3 percent administrative fee.



space, \$107.70 for the same in commercial space and \$99.86 for industrial space.

- An across-the-board 3 percent administrative fee, a change opposed by the committee but Weitz said was recommended later because the city may begin issuing its own building permits instead of depending on a joint office with the county.
- Fee categories coinciding with Hall's program, started in 2003.

Combined with county impact fees but not counting the administrative cost, development in Gainesville will ring up \$1,615.85 per new home, and \$279.58 per 1,000 square feet of office space; \$149.71 for commercial and \$157.92 for industrial, given council's OK.

The city fee structure generally exceeds Hall's, mainly because service levels are higher and the county gleans more special purpose sales taxes, Padgett said.

Council raised concerns about stymieing growth. "We're not familiar with any strong evidence that shows that is the case," Weitz answered. "In fact, we believe the evidence refutes that."

He pointed to fast-growing areas such as Canton, where developers use new facilities funded by impact fees as selling points.

Padgett said impact fees can help maintain parks and public safety service levels threatened by growth. The fees supplement traditional revenue sources; namely, property and sales taxes.

"The development's out there. ... More is coming. And we need to keep up with it," Padgett said.

To Wangemann, the charge on new growth is more fair, and steers clear of raising property taxes.

Weitz said about 24 local governments in Georgia, Forsyth County included, have impact fees. Those proposed for Gainesville rate about a fourth of the maximum allowed by state law, and less than Roswell and Alpharetta's, but more than Canton's.

The residential charges would have raised \$1.4 million over the past three years, according to housing permits issued in Gainesville. Neither staff nor Weitz offered estimates for revenue from businesses, citing the difficulty of parsing projections

Council updates

Also Thursday, Gainesville City Council discussed:

- Annexation policy that blocks property owners who are adjacent to the city limits and need sewer service, such as for a failed septic system, but cannot annex and connect to the system because the building on the property does not meet city standards. These hardship cases are rare, but usually involve mobile homes.
- July 5 zoning and annexation requests, including plans for a 289-lot subdivision on Gaines Mill Road that spurred no opposition at the June 13 Planning and Appeals Board hearing. "Amazing," Councilman George Wangemann said. Three previous failed tries to annex the Gainesville Nonprofit Development Foundation property drew a crowd of critics.
- Leaving Friday for the annual Georgia Municipal Association convention, which runs through Tuesday in Savannah. The trip will cost about \$4,500, according to city staff.
- Personal and litigation issues, behind closed doors.

Rick Lavender

based on the myriad business categories.

Large developments approved but not yet built, such as the 605-acre Mundy Mill community planned for 2,186 homes and 1-million-plus square feet of businesses, will pay the fees levied when applying for building permits.

The proposal has apparently drawn little criticism.

Van Neese of the Home Builders Association Gainesville-Hall County said the association does not oppose the fees, and he believes the city has done its due diligence so far.

But Neese, who served as a non-voting member of the impact fees advisory committee, cautioned that adding building costs only drives new home prices higher, particularly in light of rising material, labor and mortgage costs, limiting affordable housing and a vital part of the county's economy.

"Any time you start having things that affect (the building industry), you need to ... step lightly," he said Thursday afternoon.

Immediately following the work session that morning, Gainesville police Capt. Jane Nichols cast the fees as one way to keep pace with the city's expanding population and limits. "All we're really trying to do is maintain the level of service we have," Nichols said.

As evidence, she suggested the 30-year-old police headquarters, a building outdated and dogged by maintenance problems. "We have people working out of what really should be closets."

The state has approved changing the city's comprehensive land-use plan to list potential impact fee projects. After that review period ends later this month, the way is clear for council to consider adopting the fees.

Contact: rlavender@gainesvilletimes.com, (770) 718-3411.

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