

City lacking mechanism to create parks

Dallas: Officials seen as unwilling to make developers help

08:09 AM CST on Thursday, March 30, 2006

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Many children and adults in Dallas don't have easy access to neighborhood parks because developers are not required to help create them, experts say.

North Dallas already is short of neighborhood parks, and the development-ready southern sector probably will be too if something isn't done, park officials say.

Dallas' 2002 long-term development plan for its park system recommends creating a park-dedication program that requires developers to donate land or pay to create parks.

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But there's been little movement to do anything about it.

"City Hall has periodically through the years discussed some sort of an impact fee or donation program. There has never been the political will to implement that type of a program," said Lois Finkelman, vice chair of the National Recreation and Park Association, a group that advocates park creation and preservation.

"It's important to plan ahead. You have to anticipate where the use will be and preserve whatever appropriate piece of land is necessary, and as a city we didn't do that."

Neighborhood parks are supposed to make areas more livable for residents. The parks are usually no bigger than 15 acres and serve people within about a half-mile radius.

Other cities have addressed park creation through various mechanisms. Arlington and Plano charge flat fees for each new residence. Some have a more complicated approach. For instance, Fort Worth has a

flat fee in the built-out central city, while the rest of the city works under a formula that determines how much parkland needs to be dedicated.

The fees and land donations work exceptionally well in fast-growing areas because they allow parks to be added as development occurs, park supporters say.

"In highly developed areas, the cost of land is very expensive and it's much harder to go back and find a piece of land for a park in a community," said Ms. Finkelman, who is a former City Council member and former president of the Dallas Park and Recreation Board.

Dallas has a lot of parkland compared to many cities, but it is not evenly distributed across all areas, according to park officials. Many neighborhoods don't have easy access to parks.

Plano finds that fees have been instrumental in creating neighborhood parks. The city has collected more than \$16 million in such fees since 1993. So far, it has spent about \$12 million buying and developing parks.

"We have a neighborhood park roughly every square mile in this city," said Robin Reeves, the city's chief park planner. Without such fees, "it would have been a real problem to keep pace with development."

While Dallas has 121 neighborhood parks in its system, some neighborhoods are not being served, park planner Michael Hellmann said.

Mr. Hellmann said programs requiring developers to pay impact fees are so common elsewhere that he is often asked what the fees are in Dallas.

"They expect it," he said. "When they find out that Dallas doesn't have impact fees, they go, 'Really?'"

The fees are not a panacea but only one segment of a comprehensive park plan, experts say. They usually don't provide enough money to create parks in expensive areas, they're challenging to implement in built-up areas, and they don't help maintain parks in existence.

Also, the issue is sensitive for developers and builders, who see the fees as an added tax burden.

"All fees are troublesome," said Robert Morris, chief executive officer of the Home Builders Association of Greater Dallas. "It will drive up the price of housing. You really wind up pricing people out of the market."

He said that cities should use bonds or other funding mechanisms to finance park infrastructure so that costs are more evenly spread out.

Mr. Morris said that if Dallas tries to institute impact fees or require land donations, his group will likely lobby against it.

City Manager Mary Suhm said she has no plans to institute such a program.

"All of it has the potential to limit growth," Ms. Suhm said. "And we're trying to encourage economic development, not discourage it."

Denton's parks department tried for years to create a park-dedication program, but local builders promised they would voluntarily donate and build parks instead.

In nearly two decades, only one developer actually followed through and donated a park, said Bob Tickner, Denton's superintendent of parks planning and development.

"It was obvious that wasn't working. When the real boom hit in the late '90s and the early 2000s, everybody recognized that if we don't get something in place, we're going to really be behind," he said.

The city enacted a park-dedication and fee ordinance in 1998.

"Many of your very large and progressive developers really understand that this thing really does work for them," Mr. Tickner said.

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Developing parks

How other cities implement fees to develop parks:

ARLINGTON – Fees were implemented in the late 1980s. The city is divided into districts, and fees range from about \$1,030 to \$1,145 for each new residential unit.

PLANO – Fees went into effect in 1993 and are used to purchase land and develop neighborhood parks and greenbelts. The city charges \$323 for each new apartment unit and \$467 for each new home.

FORT WORTH – The city charges a flat fee of \$500 for each additional residential unit located within the area generally bounded by the Interstate 820 loop. In areas outside the loop, the city typically requires that developers dedicate parkland based on a formula. Developers have the option to develop the park themselves or pay the city a fee of \$30,000 per acre.

DENTON – When a builder plats a development, the city uses a formula to determine how acreage must be donated for parkland. In lieu of donating land, the developer can pay the city a fee based on the

market value. When developers apply for building permits, they also pay a fee of \$291 per single-family home, and \$187 for each apartment unit.

SAN ANTONIO –Developers must set aside one acre for every 70 single-family homes and one acre for every 114 apartment units. The developer can donate the land to the city or to the homeowners association. The city tightened restrictions last year to make it more difficult for developers to simply pay a fee.

AUSTIN – For residential subdivisions, developers give land or money. The land donation equals roughly five acres per 1,000 new residents. Since most subdivisions are relatively small, most developers pay fees. Each year, Austin collects about \$800,000 to \$900,000 a year in fees.

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research

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