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City moves closer to fire assessment in 3-2 vote

**BY CHRISTOPHER CURRY
THE STAR-BANNER**

OCALA - A majority of the Ocala City Council supported the creation of an impact fee on new development and an assessment on all residential and commercial buildings to fund Ocala Fire-Rescue's rising budget.

The 3-2 vote Tuesday night to move forward did not finalize either fee. Both will come back for a final vote later in the summer.

If approved, they would take effect Oct. 1.

The assessment would start at \$144 a year for all houses, mobile homes and apartments, no matter the size. It would be collected in \$12 monthly installments on Ocala Electric Utility bills. OEU customers in unincorporated Marion served by the county's fire department will not be charged.

The residential fire assessment is expected to rise each year to a monthly rate of \$15.23 in 2010-11 as the fire department budget rises.

For commercial properties, government buildings and churches, the assessment would be based on square footage. In 2006-07, it would start at \$12 a month for properties of 2,000 square feet or less and go up to \$1,643 a month for buildings of more than 300,001 square feet.

There would be no assessment on undeveloped property.

The fire department's budget is expected to rise from \$11.9 million this year to \$13.5 million in 2006-07, when the new Station No. 6 along the State Road 200 corridor near Heath Brook and Fore Ranch goes into operation and the city brings in 17 more firefighters and new equipment, Finance Director Don Corley said.

The assessment would raise about \$5.5 million, or roughly 44 percent of the 2006-07 budget.

"We need more, but we know better than to ask for it," Corley said of the

The issue:

Funding Ocala Fire-Rescue

What's new:

City Council voted 3-2 Tuesday night for staff to draft an ordinance creating a fire assessment and a \$386 fire impact fee on new development. The fire assessment would be collected in \$12 monthly installments on Ocala Electric Utility bills.

What's next?

The ordinance is to go back to the City Council in two weeks to a month, with a final vote expected two weeks after that.

assessment.

City council members Kyle Kay and Charles Ruse Jr. were the dissenting votes, saying they supported the impact fee but not the assessment.

"It is a tax," Kay said of the assessment. "There is no other way to say revenue to a government is anything but a tax because the individual on the paying end has two choices: I can pay it or I'll really be in big trouble."

Kay said he preferred that staff try to cut other areas of the city budget, possibly the Economic Improvement Fund grants used to attract new businesses.

Council members Mary Sue Rich, Kent Guinn and Daniel Owen voted for the assessment.

"I think it's the proper thing to do because the cost of everything is going up," Rich said. "I think they cut the budgets back as tight as they can get them. I don't think there's any fat."

A city study showed an average assessment of \$122 in Florida cities with similar populations. The Marion County Commission is considering raising the county's annual fire assessment from \$125.19 to \$165.99.

Christopher Curry may be reached at [chris.curry@](mailto:chris.curry@starbanner.com)

starbanner.com or 867-4115.
