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Counting the cost of growth

By LEVI PULKKINEN and ISOLDE RAFTERY Staff Writers

MV schools ask for more money from developers

MOUNT VERNON — Growth is coming to Mount Vernon schools, and developers need to foot more of the bill.

That's the message school officials plan to take Wednesday to the City Council. And with about \$2 million in future funding on the line, they're hoping the council will agree.

The Mount Vernon School Board has asked the city to increase by 70 percent fees charged to developers building new homes in the district.

If the council approves the increase, it will be the first substantial hike since the city started assessing developers with the fees in 1993. Since then, Mount Vernon School District's enrollment increased from 5,102 students to 5,740.

An increase is already overdue, district officials say. "The board has said publicly, 'We need to catch up,'" Superintendent Carl Bruner said.

The district's proposal concerns some developers, although last-minute reductions of the proposed increase have eased the worries of some. And some City Council members want the district to better justify the proposal.

Fair share

Developers building in Mount Vernon have, since 1993, paid the city fees of \$2,600 to \$3,000 per house to offset the impact on city schools. The fees go into a district fund for new facilities.

State law allows cities to recover a "fair share" of the costs put upon the existing system by people moving into new homes through impact fees. The city currently charges developers \$7,158 per house in impact fees. Included in that amount is a \$2,912 fee that goes to the school district.

The proposal headed to the City Council would raise the district's fee to \$5,000 for each new single-family home. Most apartments and condominiums would be assessed a fee of \$2,900 a unit for schools under the proposal.

According to school district estimates, Mount Vernon schools will serve about 6,700



Teacher Mary Nolte instructs third-graders at Mount Vernon's Centennial Elementary School. School District officials estimate that two new elementary schools will need to be built by 2011 to accommodate increases in enrollment driven by growth.
Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald



students by 2010, an increase of about 1,000 students over current enrollment.

To do so, the district will need two more elementary schools, Mount Vernon School Board member Warren Gilbert has said.

Dozens of recently built homes are visible in this view from the Maddox Creek development in southeast Mount Vernon. Little Mountain Elementary School is visible in the distance.

Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

“Those two elementary schools are going to be 100 percent, in my view, necessary,” Gilbert said.

The higher impact fee would probably bring in about \$2 million, Bruner said.

While that’s not nearly enough to pay for a new elementary school — they cost about \$14 million, according to the district — the money would make it easier to convince voters to support a construction bond, Bruner said.

Flawed forecast

In a review of the proposal last month, the district’s consultant — Shockey, Brent and Associates — found a flaw in the forecast the firm had prepared for the district, Bruner said. The per-house impact was not \$13,000, as initially projected, but closer to \$8,000.

The school district has since lowered its proposed impact fee to \$5,000 from \$6,500 for each house.

The decision came weeks after district officials met with developers concerned about the plan. But School Board Member Rob Johnson said the request was not revised to appease developers.

“It was just flat-out a miscalculation,” Johnson said. “It had nothing to do with pressure or political considerations.”

Last week, the school board approved the new proposal and forwarded it to the City Council for consideration. The district’s proposal includes a six-month delay in implementation of the fee.

The changes mollified some developers, but they still plan to review the school district’s enrollment forecasts and cost projections, said Burlington developer Brian Gentry of Landed Gentry Homes.

While the district’s forecasts could be correct, Gentry said he and other developers plan to take their own look at the numbers.

“It’s always a challenge anytime the costs go up in your business,” Gentry said. “We’re not anti-schools or anything like that, but anytime you have an additional cost, you want to look at it.”

Council decision

The school district’s request goes before the council Wednesday, and it’s still unclear what kind of reception it will get.

Councilman Joe Lindquist, a 2002 graduate of Mount Vernon High School, said he thinks the

council should “bite the bullet” and pass the increase. In the future, though, he said the district should move to increase the fees more gradually.

“It’s my opinion that we’re going to have to adjust them every year or two, so we don’t get the backlash as much,” he said.

Lindquist and Councilman Glenn Ash both said they were surprised by the district’s modest enrollment increases — about 200 more students in the past five years.

Both said they believe the district’s claim that enrollment will increase significantly in coming years. But Ash said the district needs to better justify its enrollment forecasts at Wednesday’s meeting before the proposed increase will get his vote.

ON THE AGENDA

What: Mount Vernon City Council meeting

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Mount Vernon Police/Court Campus, 1805 Continental Place

Issue: The council is set to consider an increase in fees charged to developers to pay for schools. The council will also consider several amendments to the city’s growth plan, including a long-term plan for a bridge at Kincaid Street at Mount Vernon’s downtown.

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