

County approves impact fees

Fund collection is set to begin June 1

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By ALECIA WARREN/Staff writer |

COEUR d'ALENE - Four years of hearings, discussions and calculations finally paid off.

Following a public hearing on Friday, the Kootenai County commissioners voted unanimously to collect 100 percent of impact fees requested by local service districts.

The fees, long in the making, will help fund improvement projects to accommodate new growth.

"It is an important tool that a lot of districts need, because I don't believe growth pays for itself," Commissioner Dan Green said after the vote. "Today was an important step, though we still have issues to work out with the cities to make it fully functional."

Fee collection will begin June 1, the officials voted.

Kootenai County has never collected impact fees before.

The fees, charged only to builders of new structures, will go toward capital improvement projects for fire districts, highway districts and county districts like the sheriff's department, jail, EMS and parks and recreation.

Jimmie Dorsey, commissioner for East Side Highway District, said the additional funding is crucial to keep up with demands on roads.

"A lot was accomplished today. There was a lot of talk along the way about not funding 100 percent," Dorsey said, alluding to past discussions that lower fees might lure more development.

The fees will help pay for capacity improvements like intersection widening, Dorsey added.

"Growth is really affecting us - granted, not like it was before," he said. "It's important to have growth pay for itself, especially in this economic time."

Larry Clark, commissioner of Northern Lakes Fire District, said the fees will help fund millions of dollars in equipment and structures, including a new fire station and multiple fire engines.

"It's been a long time coming," Clark said.

Districts have already held their own hearings on which projects they want to fund with impact fees.

There is still another crucial step to make, however.

Fee collection is delayed until June so the county can pursue intergovernmental agreements with cities, which still have to agree to collect impact fees within city limits on the county's behalf.

The county only has authority to collect in unincorporated areas of the county.

"I'm in the spirit of cooperating with the cities," Green said at the hearing, addressing city representatives. "You know it's something we need, and we need your help."

Commissioner Todd Tondee said he is optimistic, because the county recently sent agreement drafts to the cities.

"We have a starting point," he said, adding that impact fee collection should start just in time for the construction season.

But Eric Keck, city administrator for the city of Post Falls, showed resistance at the hearing.

Post Falls already has its own impact fees, Keck pointed out. It puts a burden on city residents to pay county impact fees, too.

"Coupling those on top of the cities fees could be up to \$6 per square foot (that builders must pay)," he said.

Large developments looking at that figure "would walk," he said.

He doesn't see the need for county impact fees to fund improvement projects, he added.

"Honestly, that's what general funds are for," he said.

Any difficulties with the impact fee collection, Keck said, could result in the fees being challenged and thrown out by the Legislature altogether.

"That will lead to the fees' undoing," he said.

The county can delay the collection of impact fees if negotiations with cities drag.

To placate the cities, the county has removed all rolling stock from its departments' capital improvement plans, which some cities had argued should not be covered by impact fees.

But fire district representatives said they wouldn't do the same, as they depend on rolling stock like fire engines.

"To me, it would be ludicrous for a fire district to have bricks and mortar but not have a fire engine to put out fires," Clark said. "It's a matter of life and death."

He is confident that the cities will agree to collect the impact fees, he added.

"We have to be optimistic," he said. "I think when they realize how we bring a service to the community, they'll come to our side of thinking. We're protecting their citizens, as well as our customers."

The approved impact fees benefiting fire districts range from \$833 to \$2,377 per dwelling unit for residential, and from 39 cents to \$1.65 per square foot for non-residential.

Fees for highway districts range from \$305 to \$1,813 per dwelling unit for residential; 95 cents to \$5.68 per square foot for commercial; and 32 cents to \$1.71 per square foot for industrial.

Fees for county departments range from \$16.30 to \$621.34 per dwelling unit for residential, and zero to 27 cents per square foot for non-residential.

Fees could be lowered as districts modify their improvement plans. The commissioners voted not to allow any exemptions.

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