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County strips Beaumont of sales-tax money for road repairs

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By DUG BEGLEY
The Press-Enterprise

Riverside County transportation officials stripped Beaumont of its sales-tax money for road repairs, continuing a feud among regional officials and the city over impact fees.

The money from the county's half-cent sales tax, an estimated \$470,000 meant for maintenance of Beaumont streets, is contingent on the city participating fully in the county's Transportation Uniform Mitigation Fee program. Transportation officials removed Beaumont's eligibility from the sales-tax proceeds Wednesday.

Instead of going to Beaumont, the sales-tax money will be used for regional road projects.

The Western Riverside Council of Governments, which oversees the impact-fee program in the western part of the county, claims Beaumont failed to turn over tens of millions of dollars that should have been submitted for regional road projects. The council of governments sued Beaumont last month, seeking money officials said Beaumont owes. Previous estimates placed the disputed amount at \$53 million.

The city has defended itself by saying earlier agreements with developers who pay the fee forced Beaumont to keep the money. Officials said the money was spent on road improvements identified by the council of governments.

Beaumont Councilman Roger Berg on Wednesday morning vigorously defended his city, noting that Beaumont did give some impact-fee money to the council of governments. He also noted that council of governments officials lauded Beaumont's road building until they decided they could try and recoup money from the city.

Others disputed those claims, with many noting the issue would have to be decided in court.

Berg agreed.

"I guarantee you there is going to be a big fight," he said.

Berg said Beaumont should be lauded for its ability to build roads and ease congestion.

But that isn't what the regional agreement allowed, county Supervisor Bob Buster said. Buster, who conceded Berg's point that many other cities have traded fees for construction or exempted projects from paying the fee, said Beaumont still deprived other nearby cities like Banning and Calimesa in having a say in how the local money was spent.

"The whole rationale is there would be this joint planning," Buster said of the impact fee program. "So it would flow much more naturally. Sadly, Beaumont never saw that vision."

The first hearing in the lawsuit is set for Nov. 16.

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