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Council delays land transfer fee decision

By Renee Messacar - Staff Writer

SYCAMORE - The city council wants two more weeks to think about whether to pursue a referendum that, with voters' approval, would charge a fee each time a property changes hands. The Ad Hoc Committee on Growth Management proposed the real estate transfer fee to save the Sycamore School District from a potential \$8.5 million deficit.

Mayor Ken Mundy and City Manager Bill Nicklas have been meeting for three weeks with the committee, composed of representatives from other taxing bodies and local groups, to establish ideas for solving the school district's problem of growing too quickly and not receiving enough state aid.

In the next 10 years, the district could fall into an \$8.5 million deficit if current growth and state aid patterns remain the same, according to a study by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies.

The committee narrowed its list of money-generating ideas to a few options, including the real estate transfer fee, more aggressively pursuing commercial and industrial development, and increasing impact fees.

"I would like to see the park district's impact fees remain in line with the school district's," 2nd Ward Alderman Pete Paulsen said. Both districts improve the quality of life in Sycamore, he said.

The city council on Monday supported the committee's suggestions, except for the real estate transfer fee.

Alderman Chuck Stowe, 2nd Ward, asked if the city would take on the work of the referendum for such a fee and then hand all the money it generates to the school district.

"Since the money would be raised specifically for school purposes, it would go to the school superintendent's office," Nicklas said.

Aldermen also wondered whether Cortland transactions would be subject to the fee, as many Cortland students attend Sycamore schools. Nicklas said Cortland would be outside the city's jurisdiction for the fee.

Stowe suggested that the ad hoc committee include a Cortland representative.

When Alderwoman Cheryl Maness made a motion that the council give the committee the OK to continue pursuing these options, the motion died.

Nicklas asked the council whether it had alternative ideas since it didn't support the ones presented. He asked aldermen to give him direction on what to tell committee members when they next meet.

"If we spent the money to have a study done and the committee is meeting and agreeing to do things to get us moving in the right direction ... we need to know where we're going," Maness said.

Third Ward Alderwoman Barbara Leach said she needed more time to consider the proposals and seek constituents' input.

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Stowe agreed.

"I'm not going to tell you tonight after two meetings of the committee that I support a transfer fee," he said. "I support further discussion of the fee."

Stowe said he would be more willing to pursue the transfer fee if the school district were willing to sign an intergovernmental agreement on property tax abatements for prospective businesses.

The city, park district, Sycamore Public Library, Sycamore Township, Cortland Township and DeKalb County have agreed to offer abatements of 90 percent of property taxes in a business' second year of operation, 75 percent in the third and 50 percent in the fourth. The school district wants a more conservative abatement plan.

"The incentives package needs to be signed onto," 1st Ward Alderman Alan Bauer said.

Nicklas said that the school district likely hasn't changed its stance since previous discussions on abatements, and Mundy said the council can't and shouldn't try to make the school district do anything.

Paulsen made the motion that the city council support the Ad Hoc Committee in further pursuing the options under the terms that the park's impact fees remain in line with the school district's and Cortland is asked to participate on the committee.

The motion failed 2-5, with only Paulsen and Maness supporting it. Fourth Ward Alderwoman Terry Kessler was not present.

"I hope we can continue to provide fresh leadership for this group to manage growth," Nicklas said, "and I don't think we did that tonight."

Mundy asked the council to get past its "adversarial" relationship with the school board.

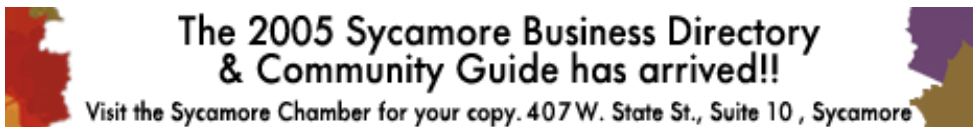
The council will discuss real estate transfer fees and other committee suggestions at its next meeting June 20. The committee will meet at 4 p.m. the following day.

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