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## **Debate over traffic impact fees begins**

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City council will resume the journey toward better streets Monday by deciding whether impact fees are the best funding method for new and improved roadways.

The fees are designed to make developers pay for the impact new traffic associated with their projects will have on collector and arterial roads within the city limits.

While the process for instituting the fees is spelled out in the Local Government Code, the reality of getting them approved in New Braunfels might not be easy.

The recently instituted Drainage Ordinance met with fierce resistance from builders and developers after council made connection fees mandatory within 3,000 feet of an existing drainage utility structure.

Although he and his colleagues balked at the mandatory drainage utility fees, builder Steve Lange said he believed the builder and developer community would approach roadway impact fees differently.

"I think the community in general is for impact fees," he said. "New developments need to be responsible, but the fees need to be fair and equitable."

Unlike the drainage utility fee, which is the same for every residential lot platted anywhere in the city, road impact fees are assessed within six-mile areas or trafficsheds. The amount of the fee varies, based in part, on the quality of the existing roads within the trafficshed.

Fees can be waived, an exemption provided most often for economic development situations.

City Manager Chuck Pinto said residential developments would not qualify.

"A waiver would not be given arbitrarily," he said.

Because the per-lot fee would be the same for high density and low density development in the same trafficshed, Lange acknowledged the impact would be greater on the people would could least afford to pay more money for their new homes.

"There is no doubt all those fees are more easily absorbed in bigger houses, (which are) purchased by people with more money," he said.

While more difficult for lower income home buyers to swallow, the fees are more strictly fair for high density, less expensive neighborhoods — smaller lot sizes bring a home's cost down but also means more vehicle-driving homeowners per acre.

Councilwoman Sonia Muñoz-Gill said the roadway problems associated with growth had as much to do with location as the size of the development.

"We have huge farms and ranches on old county roads that are being sold and developed," she said. "The roads in those areas were not designed to handle so much traffic."

Muñoz-Gill cited Goodwin Lane, access roadway for the existing Quail Valley subdivision and the proposed 707-home Oak Creek Estates, as an example of a country road overtaxed by traffic from just one subdivision, let alone two.

"How will we pay for those improvements?" she asked rhetorically. "Growth is having an impact on our infrastructure and traffic flows. We have to be proactive to meet that challenge."

Faced with the effects of rapid growth and more slowly growing tax revenue, council decided last October to make consideration of impact fees a priority.

If current council members decide they want to assess the fees for new developments within the city limits, their first steps must be to form a committee and hire a consultant.

Although council already has set aside \$100,000 for the impact fee

study, Planning Director Frank Robbins has suggested lowering the costs by using staff assets.

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