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Developer fees mulled by Sequim officials

By Diane Urbani de la Paz
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SEQUIM -- One of Sequim's hottest buttons is to be the subject of a public forum next month, City Manager Steve Burkett said Tuesday.

New developers' fees -- to help pay for parks, street improvements, a new police station and a new City Hall -- have all been discussed, and argued about, by the Sequim City Council during the past two years.

Despite its disagreements, the council hired The Henderson Group, a Redmond consultant group, to conduct studies of how the city could implement such charges.

They're generally called impact fees, though the ones for the police facility and City Hall officially are known as "mitigation" fees, said Burkett.

Whatever the labels, these fees are cause for worry among some in the community where commercial and residential development has been a main growth industry.

Last year, then-council members Paul McHugh and Walt Schubert questioned whether higher building costs for developers would shut them -- and the people who would live and work here -- out of Sequim, thus hog-tying the local economy.

But McHugh didn't run for re-election; Don Hall won his seat after defeating Mike East, an ally of Schubert's, in the November election.

Schubert ran, but lost his seat to Ted Miller, a staunch proponent of impact fees.

Moving forward

On Monday night, during the first City Council meeting with McHugh and Schubert gone, Miller spoke to Burkett about moving forward on the fee-approval process.

The Henderson Group's studies are in draft form, and Burkett said he is reviewing them now.

One of the next steps toward enacting one, all or none of them, the city manager added, is the gathering of public input.

"We plan to have an open house, on all four of [the proposed fees]," Burkett said.

Opponents and advocates will have the opportunity to talk with the consultants, ask questions and register comments.

Open house

That open house could happen as soon as early February, Burkett added.

Then comes a City Council workshop and a public hearing, and the council may be ready to take action -- as in approving new fee ordinances -- in March.

Burkett told the council Monday night that he will work out a schedule for the series of public sessions and present it to the council during its Jan. 25 meeting, to start at 6 p.m. in the Sequim Transit Center at 190 W. Cedar St.

New configuration

The council's new configuration, with Ken Hays chosen as mayor Monday night, may be more unified than ever around additional developers' fees.

Hays, an architect who works in cities around the Pacific Northwest, has said that many other growing communities have had impact fees for some time.

Yet the new mayor acknowledged the imposition of such charges in Sequim has been, and will be, a much-disputed issue.

"This is an important discussion for the community to have," Hays said.

Miller, for his part, feels Schubert and other former council members allowed too much development with too little in the way of fees for city infrastructure.

He believes most people in Sequim want builders to pay more -- and have had to wait too long for an overhaul of the fee structure.

The raw materials have been ready, Burkett said, adding that Henderson's study of the proposed parks impact fee was finished a year ago.

"Let's make sure we go ahead" with this process, Miller said, "and finish it."

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