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Tuesday, May 10, 2005

Developer fees spark debate

By LEROY STANDISH/Staff Writer

APPLE VALLEY — Tonight's debate on raising development impact fees has sparked unrest in the community.

Consider a sampling of the developments leading up to tonight's meeting:

The Building Industry Association's Baldy View Chapter conducted a phone survey last week polling residents about development impact fees and Planned Unit Developments. Town councilmembers — at least one who suggested that the survey was slanted — have been contacted by the BIA regarding the fees. The Victor Valley Association of Realtors is urging its members to attend tonight's Town Council meeting. And the Apple Valley Chamber of Commerce is unable to come to a consensus on the issue.

It seems everyone has an opinion about the proposed increase. Even town spokeswoman Kathie Martin is not exempt.

"Apple Valley's fees can and should be higher," Martin said. "Between our lot sizes (half-acre minimum) and higher development standards, the cost of doing business here is higher than our neighboring communities."

The town is mulling the idea of more than doubling development impact fees on a single family home from \$6,309 to \$12,729, an increase that would make them the highest in the Victor Valley. The fees are used to pay for a variety of town wants and needs, like a master drainage study, roads, park amenities, animal control, law enforcement, sewers, public meeting facilities and other features to keep the town's infrastructure on pace with growth.

Proponents of the increase point to Measure N, the 1999 voter approved measure that mandates home lot sizes of a half-acre or greater. Martin said that the measure came with a cost.

"It's basic math. If you have a mile of road with half-acre lot sizes you have to divide the cost of developing that road by the cost of that number of homes," Martin said. "If the lot sizes are smaller and there are four homes an acre or six homes an acre that development cost can be spread over a greater number of homes and those costs would be less as in our neighboring communities."

The 11 board members of the Apple Valley Chamber of Commerce have been unable to arrive at consensus on the subject.

"It is really a volatile issue," said Janice Moore, CEO and president of the chamber. "Some of us feel that with the community only 25 percent built out that it is very premature to come up with fees of this magnitude ... We all agree that fees need to be increased."

The question is to what degree?

The building industry is fighting to have the fees phased in over a period of two years. Last week an industry telephone poll showed 68 percent of Apple Valley residents want the fees phased in over time, said Councilman Rick Roelle. He did not take the poll, but was advised of its results via an e-mail from the BIA.

He said the survey may have some flaws.

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"If it was phrased in the way it was described to me it was not a very credible poll," Roelle said. "It was more of a sales pitch."

Resident Darryl Evey responded to the poll. He said it didn't feel like a survey.

"They would ask me a question to get my input and then they would proceed to try and change my mind and then they would ask me the question again," he said. "They were not interested in what I felt they were interested in how could they change my mind."

The telephone poll also asked how he felt about planned unit developments and if changing the name of a PUD to include "family" or "recreational community" in its name would make it more acceptable, Evey said.

Carlos Rodriguez, vice president of the BIA's Baldy View Chapter, said 300 likely Apple Valley voters were selected at random to participate in the poll done by Probolsky Research, which has a 5.8 percent margin of error.

"I really think the poll stands on its own merits. It was a scientific poll," Rodriguez said.

The building industry supports a fee increase, but not all at once, because it would impact housing affordability, he said.

"If we are not able to build homes and sell homes no one is going to get the benefit of those fees."

President Don Jensen, of the Victor Valley Association of Realtors, posted a message on the Victor Valley Multiple Listing Services Web site urging members to attend tonight's meeting.

"Invite your clients testimonials ... they may not have qualified with this increase. Other alternatives such as a phase-in of the fee should be considered," read the statement.

"If we do not do something to improve the future infrastructure, what is that going to do for the citizens of Apple Valley now," Roelle said. "Actually it is going to decrease the property values and no one is gong to want to live here."

Moore said the chamber may ask the council to put off its vote and invite more voices into the discussion.

"It can't just be a consultant and five council members, there is a lot more at stake and to give thoughtful consideration to," she said. "We want controlled growth. It is not necessarily slow growth, but it is thoughtful."

LeRoy Standish may be reached at 951-6277 or leroy_standish@link.freedom.com.

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