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Developers need to shoulder expense

By Bettye Glover

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In early January I went to City Hall to hear a presentation to our council by Duncan Associates, Austin, Texas, on the development fee study they conducted for our City.

Long a believer in impact fees to assist local governments in providing essential services for continued growth, this was one work-study session I didn't want to miss. It was, I believed, 20 years overdue.

The report was professional and easy to understand. We were assured by the presenter that if the fees were adopted at the maximum level calculated, an estimated \$672,000 could be generated for the City on an annual basis. Besides that, the impact fees could be implemented right away. This was good news.

Because our water and wastewater systems already have fees to generate revenue, these monies could be used to bolster our general fund that is drained each year by demands from the Public Safety and Parks Departments.

In recent days I have learned that pressure from special interests has caused members of our Board of Aldermen to 'cave.' They have reduced the impact fee figure now to only a third of the original projection. This behavior on the part of our elected officials is unacceptable.

Our Parks Department is destitute. Every taxpayer in our city needs to sit up and pay attention.

Sometime in 1995 the McGlothlin land that joins Richland Park became available for purchase, on the condition that it be used to benefit our young people. Since there was no way to expand Meadowbrook Park, the land adjacent to Richland was an absolute necessity to enlarge our park services. Council members, as I remember it, believed that they could sell off a portion of the acreage for the new high school and pay down the debt to a level where the city could manage it. Even though they tried for months to negotiate a deal with the Board of Education, it never materialized. The high school ended up on the Searcy land off College Street and Searcy Lane.

After this failure, council members never came back to the public and asked the citizens how they wanted to pay this debt—whether by increase in sales tax, our property tax, or a special fee. This was not done. Instead, it has been a drain on the city's resources every year and remains an albatross around the Park Department's neck. This land debt will not be completely paid off until 2007.

A decision was made by the Park Committee and the council to contract with outsiders to conduct our sports programs. As I understand it, parks get 20 percent of the profit after expenses to produce the program are paid. The problem here is that this 20 percent does not cover the city's maintenance costs. We're going under!

Now for the solution, sometime in late 2004, the Mayor and council approved a resolution to dissolve the Advisory Committee for the City's Parks Program, which is required by state law, stating that the Park Committee of the city council could provide these services. The fact that our local government has no authority to set aside a state law, much less violate it, seems to have never entered the picture.

Some of our finest citizens had been appointed to this Advisory Committee. In my research I could never find the guidance for this group that is required by state law to delineate their duties. This guidance enables the Committee to function in a manner that is not disruptive to the Parks Department, but allows them to be a buffer between the citizens and the elected officials. It is their responsibility to bring the concerns and needs of the public directly to the Park Committee so they can be considered by the Committee and then make recommendations to the full council. In this manner our public lands, our park programs and the taxpayers' money can be protected.

In May 2005, shortly after the election, I went to see the new Mayor about the dissolution of our Parks Advisory Committee. He was receptive. I know that he is currently working behind the scenes to appoint a new citizen Committee to serve our Parks.

A special called meeting of the city council has been set for Thursday, Feb. 16, at City Hall. The adoption of the impact fees is on the agenda. Please come to this meeting and support efforts to produce the revenue so desperately needed by our Public Safety and Parks Departments.

As a participant in our local government for many years, I can assure you that what we have here has been built on the backs of our rate payers and taxpayers at the city, county, state and federal levels. For the betterment of our community, it's time the developers stepped up and carried their share of the load. Our taxpayers deserve your support.

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