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PROPOSITIONS

Houston voters OK drainage fee, but who will pay for it?

By BRADLEY OLSON
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Mayor Annise Parker may have won the Election Day battle to persuade voters to pay a fee for fixing streets and drainage problems, but who wins the war remains to be seen.

City Council members, who are listening to a chorus of local school officials, church leaders and nonprofit groups, appear to have no appetite to impose the fee on those institutions, many of which are traditionally exempt from taxes.

Yet if that view prevails, it would set up a situation in which property owners will likely be forced to pay more than they were assured by proponents of the campaign. Voters passed Proposition 1, a 20-year, \$8 billion spending plan to shore up Houston's infrastructure and reduce flooding problems, with 51 percent of the vote. Supporters said frequently on the campaign trail that the average drainage fee for a Houston homeowner would be about \$5 a month. That figure was based on the assumption that no one would be exempt from paying.

"The citizens will say, "They lied to us,"" said City Councilman C.O. Bradford, who opposed Proposition 1 because the city failed to adopt an ordinance before the vote detailing how the proposal would be implemented.

As Parker spends the coming months preparing that "implementation" ordinance, council members and some community leaders indicated a willingness to keep an open mind, although many seemed unlikely to support applying the fee to those key groups.

Galveston-Houston Archbishop Cardinal Daniel DiNardo said the Roman Catholic diocese is not absolutely opposed to the fee and supports the city's efforts to improve infrastructure. But he has concerns about the measure because of its potential impact on the 78 parishes within the city.

HISD fears layoffs

The estimated annual bill for the church in Houston would run between \$750,000 and \$1 million, he said.

"There should be a much more equitable way to handle our particular parishes and structures," he said. "Other religious institutions in the city would probably be in the same boat as we're in. ... For the poorer parishes, it's going to be very hard. Some of our poorer parishes barely make it as it is now."

The Houston school district board has staked out a more antagonistic position, saying the \$3 million or more it would have to pay the city in annual drainage fees would lead to teacher layoffs.

Parker promised she would lead a transparent process of negotiating the details of the ordinance and would lay out for council members how the drainage fee would change for property owners if certain exemptions are allowed.

Exempt some, others pay

The charter amendment added as a result of Proposition 1's passage calls for the city to collect \$125 million a year from the drainage fee and use funds from a developer impact fee and a portion of property tax funds. The \$125 million has to be raised by charter, Parker said, so the council must find a way to agree on how to get to that amount.

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Councilman Stephen Costello, an engineer and the frontman of the campaign for Proposition 1, estimated that the fee, calculated on estimates of "impervious," or hard, surface area on individual properties and other factors, would increase 15 percent to 20 percent for other payees if churches, schools and nonprofits are exempted.

The measure also calls for all the details to be worked out by July 1, including engineering studies that will identify the greatest needs for infrastructure and drainage projects. Parker insisted Wednesday that projects will be prioritized and presented for approval based only on need and not on politics. She also intends to appoint an advisory board to oversee that process .

The city's existing system for dealing with those projects, the Capital Improvement Plan, will continue in use until money builds up in the drainage fund .

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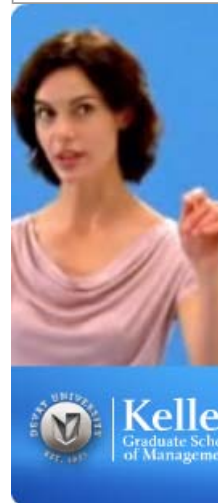
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