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Houston engineers seek to fix city's flooding problems

By BRADLEY OLSON
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
June 1, 2010, 9:28PM

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An influential group of engineers has begun to solicit voter approval for a 20-year, \$8 billion campaign to shore up Houston's infrastructure and protect the city from the intense flooding problems it has experienced in recent years.

Renew Houston, the non-profit committee formed to seek at least 22,000 ballot signatures in a bid to put the matter to voters in November, sent direct mail this week to about 150,000 households. Many received automated phone messages about the proposed charter amendment, as well.

If approved by voters, the proposal would create a dedicated fund for drainage and street renewal, using revenues from fees charged to businesses, homeowners and developers, as well as a portion of property tax money that presently is being used to pay off debt associated with infrastructure projects.

The fee levied on an average Houston homeowner with a 5,000 square-foot lot and a 2,500 square-foot home would be about \$5 a month.

"We have a utility system that is 55 percent beyond its useful life and we're not spending enough money to rehabilitate that system," said City Councilman Stephen Costello, an engineer who chairs council's Flooding and Drainage Committee. "We could, theoretically, be the first community to replace our entire infrastructure ... to where we can actually foster economic development and improve quality of life and public safety."

Mayor Annise Parker said she supports the effort, which she emphasized has been prepared independently from her office and was not an initiative she was "controlling in any way."

"I wouldn't have done it quite the same way, and there are elements of it that I don't like, but, overall, it's good for the city of Houston," she said. "It's needed. It's a good, fiscally sound plan."

Parker said she was not sure the degree to which she would campaign for the referendum and would not know until Renew Houston has the signatures necessary to put the matter on the ballot.

Three funding sources

The \$8 billion to improve drainage would come primarily from three sources. First, the "Stormwater User Fee" that is expected to amount to about \$5 per month for an average homeowner and \$90 a month for an average commercial property owner with 14 units per acre.

Second, a "Development Impact Fee" would set up a program by which developers have to pay for the degree to which their projects impact density.

Third, a "pay-as-you-go" plan that would take the estimated one-sixth of total city property tax revenues used now to pay for interest costs on debt that has financed infrastructure and drainage projects and apply it directly to new projects. In other words, the city would not incur additional debt to pay for infrastructure as part of the plan and as old debts are paid off, money used to make those payments would be put to drainage and infrastructure projects.



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Other funding

The city also would continue to use other sources of funds to pay for road and drainage improvements, such as "mobility funds," or sales taxes, collected by the Metropolitan Transit Authority and redistributed to the city.

The proposed referendum includes a provision that would continue the program for another 20 years after 2032 unless City Council votes to modify or cancel it.

Parker said she preferred that the referendum focus exclusively on drainage rather than "general infrastructure," and she also is uncomfortable that the charter amendment would prohibit future mayors from leveraging the revenues to issue debt if such a course were needed.

She added, however, that she supports the effort to get away from the excessive use of debt.

Renew Houston President Edwin Friedrichs said he hopes to get more than twice the 22,000 required signatures as the committee carries out its plan to educate Houstonians about the need to repair and replenish the city's infrastructure.

So far, recipients of the mail or participants in meetings have shown an interest, he said.

"They all seem to be really aware of the issue," he said. "We've got to fix this situation to attract new businesses here."

Concern over benefits

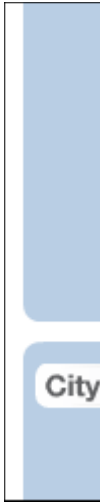
Bill King, a lawyer and former Kemah mayor who has scrutinized the city's finances and was briefed recently by Renew Houston about the plans, said he cannot support any increase in taxes or fees levied by the city until it addresses the huge problems of rising pension and health care costs for retired city employees.

"If we weren't setting aside these huge sums of money for entitlements" such as pension and health care costs, perhaps far less additional money would need to be spent on drainage, he said.

Although there is much he likes about the plan, King said he would have preferred its boosters level with voters more.

"We're calling this a utility fee, but the truth is that this is a tax increase," he said. "We need to be up front with the public and say, 'This is a tax increase and here's why we need it.'"

bradley.olson@chron.com



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keeperchrisd wrote:

Renew Houston sounds like they are going at this problem the right way. Of course there is a cost for action to maintain and improve on our infrastructure. But the cost of inaction is so much greater - more bond payment interest, worse roads, disintegrating storm sewers, and no solution to areas with frequent local flooding.

6/2/2010 10:59:38 AM

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**HtownAg** wrote:

hstnnative, You should actually read the initiative before making baseless comments. What do developers and detention ponds have to with trying to fix our streets and infrastructure? The answer is nothing. The city needs to fix the problems with our aging roads and storm sewers if we ever want our city to continue to offer opportunities for businesses to grow. Right now there isn't a way to fix all the problems, and they will only get worse over time if we don't do something about it.

6/2/2010 10:51:25 AM

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[\[Report abuse\]](#)**captdave2612** wrote:

Dang I was wishing they where talking about fixing the illegal alien flooding problem!

6/2/2010 9:02:10 AM

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[\[Report abuse\]](#)**hstnnative** wrote:

Sounds like another way increase my taxes to siphon dollars to developers and engineers - who run our political system in Houston.

How about making Developers actually follow COH guidelines for detention, instead of giving them a pass.....that may do a lot to stop flooding.

6/2/2010 9:06:46 AM

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[\[Report abuse\]](#)**hstnnative** wrote:

HTown Ag - Obviously YOU have not read the article or previous articles on this group...Otherwise you would not ask what detention ponds have to do with flooding! I live in a neighborhood that has been in the news lately - the city supposedly upgraded the infrastructure here for a developer so they wouldnt have to use their land for detention. COH helped pay to lower the road so that all water would drain into my subdivision. Many homes flooded. We dont consider it an upgrade!

Now that the percent of Houston tax dollars have maxed out for TIRZ zones(TIRZ=free tax dollars for developers) these people are looking for a new way to loot the city. Houston Developers/Engineers need to get off government welfare!

6/2/2010 1:12:29 PM

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