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Mayor to defend 'environmental fee' dinosaur park charge at freeholders meeting

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SECAUCUS AND BEYOND -- Secaucus Mayor Michael Gonnelli, along with Town Council members and administrators, were planning to attend the Hudson County Freeholders meeting Tuesday at 4 p.m. to defend the environmental impact monies that the town collects from visitors who park at Field Station: Dinosaurs in Secaucus. The move to collect the environmental impact fee has met with opposition from Freeholder Bill O'Dea. He said last month that charging the fee is unacceptable because the land for the theme park is leased from the county.

"I think the county is collecting a large amount of money for the project and we are going to get a small amount of money to help defray costs from the park," said Town Administrator David Drumeler. "It was a way for us to get back for wear and tear on our streets and our roads and having other vehicles in our town and it is the only way we have to recover."

The park, which opened Memorial Day weekend, has a three-year \$1 million dollar lease with the county. The attraction has parking for 500 vehicles. The park had originally advertised on its web site that free limited parking was available, but the free parking was viewed as a loss to the town, which didn't reap any financial gain from 'Field Station: Dinosaurs' due to the county lease.

That changed on May 22 when Secaucus officials unanimously passed a resolution to assess the environmental fee and encourage park visitors to use mass transit and not to drive. They wanted to recoup costs associated with maintaining roads as a result of vehicular traffic to the park. Proceeds from the fee would go toward upgrading a Little League field. The town has collected \$6.80 per \$10 charged to each car since the park opened, per an agreement with 'Field Station: Dinosaurs' executives. The park had over 7,000 visitors during opening weekend.

"The only way we were going to generate any type of income from this was through parking," said Mayor Michael Gonnelli during the council meeting. "That would have brought in between \$95,000 and \$100,000 a year."

O'Dea has asked to review the lease and all documents pertaining to the decision.

O'Dea said the town should not receive more than a 15 percent parking tax.

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