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GROWTH

Park fee sought on homes

Developers would pay \$3,000-\$4,000 per unit

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD**

New home construction in Bellingham could pay for new parks under a plan recommended by two city advisory boards.

By current estimates, a parks impact fee would be \$3,000 to \$4,000 per new home, and generate \$5.3 million over six years, said Bellingham Parks and Recreation design development manager Leslie Bryson.

The idea of a parks impact fee has received broad support, but real-estate agents and builders question whether the city would be taking too much, putting new homes even farther out of reach for Bellingham residents.

"It seemed like a \$4,000 hit on all subdivision units within the city was a little excessive," said Peter Roberts, incoming president for the Whatcom County Association of Realtors.

Members of the Bellingham Parks and Recreation Advisory Board gave the proposal a nod of approval Wednesday. The Bellingham Planning Commission voted Dec. 8 to recommend the City Council approve it.

The council will consider the plan by February.

For each new house or apartment, builders would pay 35 percent of the estimated cost for a proportionate amount of new parks or trails.

City staff estimated the total 2002 value of Bellingham's parks, including open space, ball fields, picnic shelters and playgrounds, at more than \$300 million. Based on that amount, the impact fee would cost builders about \$4,000 for each new single-family home, and \$3,000 for each multi-family home.

The exact fee amounts are likely to change by the time the council decides the issue as city staff updates the numbers.

The impact fee would be waived for construction of low-income housing developments; the city would absorb those costs.

The new fee would be an addition to two other impact fees in Bellingham that pay for schools and transportation.

Roberts said the city should use the income sources it already has to pay for parks - property tax, real estate excise tax and greenway tax.

"We've tried to point out that in the past, we've noticed the community builders tend to add those (impact) fees into the cost of housing," he said.

Bill Quehrn, executive vice president of the Building Industry Association of Whatcom County, said housing costs already are too high: "Eventually it's the customer, not the builder, who pays for it."

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