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Neighborhoods

Planners weigh highway impact fee ordinance in South Fayette

Developers would fund road upgrades

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By Brian David, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When John Deklawka proposed a research and technology park on Alpine Road in South Fayette two years ago, it was regarded as the straw that would break Washington Pike's back.

According to PBS&J, the township's traffic engineering firm, the Alpine Point complex would add enough cars to Washington Pike to create a need for traffic signals at the intersections with Alpine and Boyce roads and require an additional lane between those intersections.

So the township put in conditions when it approved Mr. Deklawka's plan. He would have to make the improvements to Washington Pike if he wanted to build Alpine Point to full capacity.

Mr. Deklawka sued, saying, in effect, that since his plan did not front on Washington Pike, the township couldn't make him improve that road and since his plan would only generate a portion of the traffic on the road, it was not fair to make him bear the full burden of the improvements.

"That's exactly the kind of situation a traffic impact fee ordinance would help us avoid," South Fayette engineer Dave Gardner told the planning commission Thursday night.

Commissioners have asked the planning commission to review the pros and cons of such an ordinance and make a recommendation. If South Fayette ends up adopting one, it would join Marshall, Pine, Richland, Murrysville and Findlay. Also, such an ordinance is being developed in Plum.

Essentially, the fees are assessed on new developments according to how much traffic they will generate, and the money is used to make the long-term road improvements that will be necessary to support continued development.

South Fayette can only require developers to make improvements on roads that abut their properties, and can only require them to make those improvements that are necessary to handle the traffic generated by the development itself.

The township has a history of negotiating extra improvements or contributions from developers. That approach broke down in the case of Alpine Point, however, leaving the legal question of exactly what the township can require.

Part of the problem there was that Washington Pike was just below the threshold for the traffic lights and widening. Alpine Point's traffic would not be that substantial, but would add enough to kick the road over the threshold.

If the township had an impact fee ordinance, other developments along the pike would be paying fees for the traffic they generate, and there would be a pool of money to make the improvements with Mr. Deklawa only contributing a portion.

The question facing the planning commission is whether it's worth developing an impact fee program to avoid such occasional breakdowns.

One concern is the cost: The program must be developed by an engineer, and Ray Caruso of PBS&J estimated the price at between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

It also depends on an up-to-date comprehensive plan for the township, something that's being worked on now. Then the zoning map would need to be reviewed and updated, resulting in a build-out plan, one showing what the community would be with every piece of land used to the fullest. From there road needs can be calculated, which is key to setting the amount charged to developers for the traffic they will generate.

Planning commission member Tom Iagnemma raised two other concerns.

"One thing I thought was a negative was the amount of administration involved," he said. "Also there are restrictions on the ways you could spend the money."

Money collected has to be spent in a certain amount of time, and has to be spent within the same transportation district as the contributing developer. It also can't be used for maintenance.

Another concern was whether such fees would cool development.

"Our competition is Southpointe," planning commission member Chris Neimann said. "Make [the fee] too high and they'll just go 10 miles down the road and build there."

That did not worry commission member John Gallaher, however.

"We are a growing community," he said. "I don't think we really need to worry about shying builders away from here. And with them putting all those wheels on the road, I think we need all the money we can get."

Member Alan Hoffman also proposed that the fees, if handled right, could be used to encourage commercial development; the township has a relatively high proportion of residential development, which is putting a strain on the school system, and leaders would like to see more business to build the tax base.

The commission has 60 days to make a recommendation. It will meet on the issue again this month.

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