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Port St. Lucie authorizes study of new impact fee

By [Jill Taylor](#)

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Hours after approving a \$9 increase in storm-water utility fees Monday, city council members took the first step toward creating a new storm-water impact fee to help keep new homes high and dry in downpours.

Still stinging from a \$14.4 million court loss five years ago, the city's storm-water account is in desperate shape, with drainage crews cut from six to four and demands for swale liner increasing as summer rains continue.

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Although the city has charged landowners an annual drainage fee for years, it has never imposed an impact fee on new buildings for the service. Council members on Monday agreed to pay a consultant \$31,270 to study the issue and report by Dec. 31 whether the city can impose a fee and how high it should be.

Earlier this year, consultant Walter H. Keller Inc. studied the impact new homes have on city roads, parks and public buildings and recommended the city impose fees of roughly \$2,700 for those services. The move prompted St. Lucie County officials, who previously shared impact fees for roads, parks and public buildings with the city, to implement their own fees of roughly \$2,900, setting the stage for what some home builders have vowed will be a court fight to determine which agency is entitled to the

money.

Earlier Monday, council members raised the annual storm-water utility fee for homes from \$105 to \$114 yearly, and from \$78.75 to \$85.50 for vacant building lots. Officials said the fee will need to be raised another \$9 next year to complete major drainage repairs postponed in 2000 when a circuit judge ordered the city to refund \$14.4 million to







vacant lot owners who claimed they had been overcharged for the service.

Although engineering consultants earlier this year advised the city to raise its fee \$43 this year to catch up on repairs and capital projects, council members balked at that idea, noting the city has the highest storm-water utility fee in the state.

Councilwoman Michelle Berger said she hates to vote for more impact fees in light of the city-county battle over development fees but said she had no choice. Impact fees are levied on new buildings to offset the impacts of new residents on public services ranging from police protection to parks.

"We need the money," she said.

One major project to be completed in the next few years is dredging in the area of Southbend Lakes Estates to reduce street flooding. One council member said residents often drive to their mailboxes to avoid high water two days after a downpour.

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