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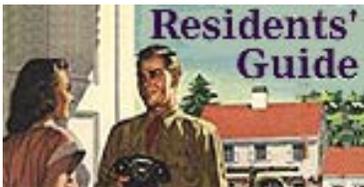
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Queen Anne's firefighters blast impact fee plan

By DANIEL VALENTINE, Staff Writer

Fire chiefs in each of Queen Anne's County's nine volunteer fire companies have come out squarely against a consultant's suggestion to stop giving impact fees directly to the companies where growth occurs.

County Fire Association President Ted Jackson told the county commissioners last week that they've told the consultant to abandon his idea to pool development fees into one pot that each company would compete for to fund new equipment and buildings.

"We're pretty much on the same page," Mr. Jackson told the commissioners as two rows of uniformed chiefs looked on.

The issue of how to divide impact fees, which came up last month as the county re-examines its adequate public facilities ordinance, caused a stir among the independent companies, who feared the change could derail their capital projects.

"He had to understand that this is an all-volunteer system," Mr. Jackson said. "There's room for compromise."

The consultant studying the ordinance had previously warned that allocating impact fees to each fire district slowed the county's ability to spend the money in a timely fashion.

A continuing court case in Anne Arundel County found that impact fees have to be returned if a government doesn't spend the money fast enough to aid new residents. In that 2003 case, residents of an Odenton development sued when county officials failed to spend impact fees for school construction they had collected starting in 1988.

Instead of allocating fees to each district where they were collected, the consultant suggested creating one fund for fire improvements that the commissioners could direct to where it was needed most.

Mr. Jackson said fire chiefs and the consultant are now looking at other options.

"With several provisions in place, there would be a minimal risk (of a challenge)," he said.

The decision to keep the old guaranteed funding system was welcomed by officials with the Kent Island Volunteer Fire Company, who are trying to raise money for a new \$7 million station.

Kent Island is owed \$411,000 from local impact fees collected since 2002, and has raised \$1 million in private donations for the project. Fire officials wanted to keep the guaranteed funding for the areas where growth was occurring.

"We have the most businesses. We have the most growth happening on homes," said Sandra Early, a spokesman for the company's capital campaign. "This really affects us."

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Published January 30, 2006, [The Capital](#), Annapolis, Md.

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