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Queen Anne's County to reduce its sewer fees

By PAMELA WOOD, Staff Writer

Queen Anne's County officials are considering a drastic reduction in sewer hookup fees in hopes of attracting more new businesses, such as Anne Arundel Medical Center's proposed satellite campus on Kent Island.

The Board of Commissioners has asked county employees to work up a proposal for cuts of 25 to 33 percent in the fees for connecting commercial developments to the public sewer system.

The fees, which are billed up-front, can easily reach into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Two big projects that could benefit are the medical center on the north side of Route 50 in Chester, as well as the Giant Food and attached shopping center in the works for the south side of Piney Creek Road.

AAMC spokesman Margot Mohsberg said reducing sewer rates will ensure the project moves forward. The hospital is currently facing a \$1 million sewer fee for a project expected to cost up to \$10 million.

"With that development cost added to the cost of our project, we would not be able to build the building," Ms. Mohsberg said. "Therefore, the (potential) relief provided by the county is very significant."

Alan Quimby, chief sanitary engineer for the county, said the sewer connection fee structure was established "20-some years ago" and hasn't been revised since.

It's based on three measurements of estimated sewage use that are multiplied by dollar amounts.

Businesses are currently charged twice as much as residents for one measurement, flow rate. Mr. Quimby said the new proposal would apply the same dollar amount to both residential and commercial users.

The county commissioners aim to spur more commercial growth while slowing the rapid residential growth on Kent Island.



"We know we need to encourage commercial. We need a stronger tax base in the commercial area," said Board of Commissioners President Joseph F. Cupani, R-Church Hill.

Mr. Cupani said the sewer rate change isn't about giving businesses a discount, it's about giving them a fair shake.

"It's more of, 'Is this a fair rate for businesses to come in and hook up?'" he said.

Suzi Eakle, the county's economic development manager, agreed the new fees would make it "more fair for business."

Having more businesses on Kent Island also may relieve traffic problems by keeping workers closer to their homes, she said. A survey last fall found that 60 percent of the county's workers go outside the county to get to work - many of them crossing the Bay Bridge to reach offices on the Western Shore, she said.

The Anne Arundel Medical Center facility could bring 160 jobs to Kent Island.

"We're hoping that a project such as this will give our residents an opportunity not to cross the bridge every day," Ms. Eakle said.

Doug Shreve, director of the advocacy group Business Queen Anne's, said he's in favor of dropping fees to encourage businesses.

Mr. Shreve said the sewer connection is just one of many high fees that business owners and developers face, including zoning review fees and impact fees.

"We're all for it," Mr. Shreve said of the proposed change. "Anything they can do for commercial, we'll back."

The Board of Commissioners will hold a public hearing on Aug. 23, Mr. Quimby said. A new rate could be approved in the fall.

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