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 - Health
 - Nation & World
 - Politics
 - Science &
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 - Transportation & Growth
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 - War on terror
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Richmond's park fees low

By Rebecca Rosen Lum
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Faced with a pocket park but no play structure, mothers in Richmond's El Sobrante Hills area have been piling their preschoolers in the car and driving to parks in Martinez, Benicia and Emeryville.

"There's a cement tunnel thing that's got to be 20 years old, but not a modern play structure," said Eleanor Loynd. "You can't take your kids to a school to play during school hours."

The area has been filling up with new homes -- and young families.

It costs money to create the kinds of services that make a subdivision a community -- parks, for instance. If rows of new homes plait the Richmond hilltop without the relief of green spaces or play space, critics, like Loynd, say that is because the city has been grossly undercharging developers for park "in-lieu" fees.

Increasingly, areas with rapid growth are charging developers to offset the costs of new parks, recreation programs and play structures. But Richmond hasn't raised its park fees in many years and is lagging behind neighboring communities by hundreds of dollars per home.

Exact figures were not available from the city, but Fred Clement, chief building official, confirmed that homebuilders pay a basic fee of \$432 per house or housing unit in Richmond. He could not supply a more detailed breakdown.

Across the border in the unincorporated area, Contra Costa County charges them 10 times that amount.

The upshot: A new, 40-home development in the El Sobrante Hills area or Richmond is collecting \$18,000 for parks that will serve the new residents.

If the subdivision were a few miles away, even using the county's old fees of \$2,000 per home, it would have netted \$80,000 -- ample for a desperately needed play structure, said Loynd

"You look at Richmond, and here we are again, not tending to business and not getting the value we should be getting," Loynd said.

Richmond studied its total impact fees two years ago, but because the study was flawed -- it did not include the impacts of new residents on transportation -- the council never adopted its recommendations, interim City Attorney Everett

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Jenkins said. "If you look at the totality of our fees, you'll find they are well below what other cities are charging."

Supporters of Richmond's green spaces say planning officials have promised in numerous meetings to increase the park tithe, but it has remained flat "for years and years and years," Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said.

The state's Quimby Act allows cities to charge developers "in-lieu" fees to offset the increased demand for parks and other resources. But each city assesses for itself what that fee must be.

"Richmond should have increased its park fees a long, long time ago," Gioia said. "The need for parks is great, and the city has the ability to implement an increase today."

Critics are taking the in-lieu fee out of context, said Clement. The city also levies a "public facility fee" that feeds open space acquisition and aquatics programs in addition to other public resources, he said. The amount varies, Clement said, but he was not able to provide percentages or ballpark figures.

Richmond has some 265 acres of park, but the number is misleading, said interim Planning Director Richard Mitchell, since East Bay Regional Parks provide thousands more at Point Isabel, Point Pinole and Miller-Knox Regional Shoreline.

"So the acreage of parks in and around the city is really quite substantial," he said.

In Walnut Creek, the 47-unit Citrus Walk, a housing development on the northeastern part of the city, landed the city's parks \$314,000, planner Scott Harriman said.

And in Livermore, the 110-unit Station Square, still in the planning stages, is expected to bring in close to \$1 million.

"It costs a lot of money to develop a park," said Richmond parks and recreation commissioner Myrtle Braxton-Ellington. "I had the feeling we're charging a lot less than other cities, and we're building homes like crazy."

California, one of the first states to pass laws clearing the way for impact fees, has some of the highest fees in the nation. For instance, a three-bedroom home on a 10,000-square-foot lot commands more than \$12,000 in Livermore but nets just \$2,134 in Boulder, Colo.

The national average fee for a single-family home is \$1,862, according to a 2005 survey by public policy consultants Duncan Associates of Austin, Texas.

Some say high fees will chase developers away. With cities and counties also billing for added pressures on existing sewers, water, roads and schools, the total package can skyrocket. But without the fees, a local government cannot expand or develop new resources. And that, according to a report by the Brookings Institution, discourages homebuilders from planning new projects in the area.

"I don't get the impression our fees are prompting developers to flee from us," Jenkins said.

The city's budget crisis in 2004 took attention away from numerous issues, Jenkins said. Although its financial recovery is well on the way, the city still needs stable, permanent executives to establish a realistic schedule of fees.

"The planning department needs to be integrally involved," he said. "We need to be able to map out exactly what we are paying for."

Reach Rebecca Rosen Lum at 510-262-2713 or rosenlum@cctimes.com.

N-LIEU PARK FEES

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY (applied in unincorporated areas): Fees range from \$2,142 per unit for a multifamily structure to \$4,489 for a single-family home. Park impact fees, paid by developers of apartment buildings or single units built on single parcels range from \$3,919 per unit for a multifamily complex to \$6,788 for a single-family home.

CONCORD: Fees range from \$1,713 for an infill unit in the city's downtown area to \$3,791 for a single-family home in a low-density subdivision.

LIVERMORE: Livermore's sliding scale for multifamily complexes ranges from \$6,565 for a studio to \$10,775 for a three-bedroom unit. Single-family homes are assessed at \$12,384.

PLEASANTON: \$9,707 for a single-family home and \$7,969 per unit for multifamily developments.

RICHMOND: \$432 for single-family homes.

WALNUT CREEK: Uses a formula to calculate the charges, multiplying the population of a new subdivision by acres of parkland per resident by fair market value of an acre. A developer will pay roughly \$100,000 for a 50-unit complex, or \$2,000 per unit.



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