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SV residents speak out on development fees

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SIERRA VISTA — The second public forum at City Hall about development-impact fees brought mostly resident opinion about how city government should accommodate for growth.

The forum on Nov. 1 brought comments mostly from developers and builders, who warned of possible negative effects of such new fees.

Others focused on the city's obligations to accommodate development with good fiscal stewardship.

After two different public turnouts so far, a third public forum will be scheduled on the topic in the week after the Thanksgiving holiday, as suggested by Councilman Craig Johnson.

Developers usually oppose these fees, citing them as market dampers. Developers usually pass the cost of such development-impact fees on to home buyers.

Dia Hurd, an 18-year Sierra Vista resident, said the city's infrastructure is not keeping up with the area's growth. She said the Quail Run Drive-area where she lives is an example of new development lacking public infrastructure.

"We're in a water-sensitive area," Sierra Vista resident Gary Wilde added. "If in fact this maximum amount helps pay, perhaps we should start at the maximum amount."

Private consulting firm TischlerBise submitted a fee schedule for various sizes of new residential and business development that it says is the maximum-supportable development-impact fee assessment for Sierra Vista's market.

During the Nov. 1 meeting, representatives for the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association said their findings in terms of the maximum-supportable schedule for this market were a little less.

Local resident Hal Thomas, former executive director of the Southeastern Arizona Contractors Association, said the most inexpensive new homes in Sierra Vista cost about \$175,000, and such fees would only increase that figure.

"I think we will have less homeowners and more apartment dwellers," he said, predicting local home prices to go "outta sight."

Tax assessments will follow these new fees up, and those who already own homes will see an increase in property taxes. Otherwise those who currently own homes here could sell for a small increase in profit, Thomas said.

Development-impact fees would further increase inflation, which is already "out of hand," he said.

"Everybody else in the county gets the bounce," Thomas said, adding property taxes increase in Sierra Vista, but are redistributed throughout the county from the state capital. Thomas said he figured about a \$3 return from the state level for every \$70 paid from Sierra Vista in property taxes if the city uses the maximum-supportable estimate figured by TischerBise.

Sierra Vista has an obligation to control that situation to benefit the city's residents, he said.

Barbara Garcia, a longtime local resident, also voiced her viewpoints.

"We're going to have to have more cops, and we know it. We're going to have to have more lights, and we know it. There are no ifs, ands or buts about it," she said.

Garcia complained that developers too often submit plans to City Hall, then request to change them during the planning and zoning process. Then council members seem to “roll over” in these instances, she said.

“I think it’s time that was stopped. What they start out with is what they do,” she said. “This is my town, and I’m sick and tired of it being used by developers.”

Garcia also complained that the older west side, which includes unincorporated county enclaves, remains neglected as the sprawl increases on other sides of town by developers.

Barbara Heinrich said restrictions caused by nature or by fees are a good answer.

“Let’s not forget this is a desert. There is only a certain amount of water, it’s not going to get better. We’re not going to start getting 30 inches of rain a year,” the local resident said.

Heinrich said local development is under-regulated, and if development-impact fees discourage some newcomers, that’s fine with her.

Garcia said anyone “crazy enough to pay \$175,000” for one of the freshly built homes in Sierra Vista, who cannot also handle the price increase resulting from new development fees, has perhaps “bit off more than they can chew.”

Councilwoman Carol Dockter said it’s important that any “unintended consequences” be sniffed out during this discussion process.

With council approval, Assistant City Manager Mary Jacobs said the first weekend in January is the earliest date a new fee schedule could be in place.

A proposed fee schedule could be considered by the council on Dec. 8.

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