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Schools seek higher home fees

School districts' building budgets could lead to impact fees averaging \$4,443 for a new house, a 50 percent increase over the current rate.

By Melissa Slager
Herald Writer

The average fee a developer pays to school districts to help offset the costs of keeping up with growth is slated to go up more than 50 percent.

By the new year, a developer could be shelling out more than \$5,700 per single-family home, passing on the bill in the purchase price.

School districts recently submitted their capital facilities plans to Snohomish County. The plans are the basis for fees charged to companies building in unincorporated areas.

Many cities have their own fees.

Impact fees are used by municipalities nationwide to handle the ripple effects of growth. Besides schools, developers pay fees to help with parks and roads.

Schools use the revenue for building projects, to buy land or add portable classrooms.

In Snohomish County, nine school districts this year are proposing fees that average \$4,443 per single-family home. That's up from a \$2,922 average among 12 school districts two years ago, the last time the plans were updated.

The Snohomish School District could propose the largest fee. It expects its fee to be similar to the current one, at \$5,798 per single-family home.

"We have no other revenue to deal with (immediate) student growth," said Karen Riddle, executive director of business and operations. "We're full in all of our buildings."

Impact fees helped the district add portables at Centennial Middle and Dutch Hill Elementary schools this summer, a \$700,000 project.

Earlier, it used \$1.7 million to purchase a former nursing home; it's now spending \$2.4 million more to renovate the facility for alternative programs.

Another \$2.4 million will help with three major construction projects: renovating the existing high school and building a second high school and a new elementary school.

The Marysville School District is dedicating all of its impact fee revenue to completing a new campus for its option programs, an \$18 million project.

The Everett School District, which is proposing to nearly triple its fee, plans to use the money to buy land for a new school in its growing south end.

Since 2002, 1,754 new homes have been built and another 2,773 are in the pipeline in the south end alone.

To come up with fee proposals, schools follow a detailed formula based on their building plans for the next six years. Factors

include estimates of how many new students a development will produce.

"Basically you have to show that you're growing in that time, then use the money for projects that will add capacity, either land or buildings," said Mike Gunn, the district's planning and facilities director.

Since fall 1991, Everett has spent \$305 million on capital projects, \$10.9 million, or 4 percent, coming from impact fees.

In all, Snohomish County school districts took in \$4.4 million in impact fees from unincorporated areas and spent \$2.8 million in 2004, the last year numbers were available.

Developers often bristle at the fees, which can reach into the tens of thousands of dollars. The City of Sammamish in King County, for example, is proposing a transportation impact fee of more than \$18,500.

School impact fees are the most volatile, said Scott Hildebrand, public policy director for the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties.

Fees apply to homes whether they're \$200,000 ramblers or \$1 million villas. As a cost of production, the fees often are passed on in sales prices.

"Essentially, you're making a \$270,000 house \$275,000," Hildebrand said. "Our argument is that \$5,000 should be paid by someone. But if it's being used for a community resource, the entire community should pay."

New fees will take effect Jan. 1. Proposed fees for single-family houses start at \$2,765, in the Lakewood School District. Edmonds, Granite Falls, Northshore and Stanwood-Camano aren't proposing fees.

The Snohomish County Planning Commission will hold a public hearing Sept. 26 on the plans before passing on the recommendations to the County Council for approval.

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Having an impact

School districts' current and proposed new impact fees on single-family homes built in unincorporated Snohomish County.

District Current fee Proposed fee

Arlington \$894 \$5,342

Darrington \$0 \$0

Edmonds \$0 \$0

Everett \$2,124 \$5,641

Granite Falls \$1,879 \$0

Lake Stevens \$3,715 \$4,409

Lakewood \$522 \$2,765

Marysville \$5,303 \$5,623

Monroe \$3,909 \$3,721

Mukilteo \$3,595 \$3,738

Northshore \$0 \$0

Snohomish \$5,798 \$5,798*

Stanwood-Camano \$2,242 \$0

Sultan \$2,166 \$2,950

* Estimated: Snohomish expects its proposed fee to be about the same as its current fee.

Source: Snohomish County

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