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Local News

Sycamore eyes increased impact fees for schools, parksBy **Dennis Hines**

The MidWeek

Impact fees for the Sycamore School District and the Sycamore Park District may be increased in the near future.

Members of the Sycamore Plan Commission approved a motion during their Sept. 12 meeting to increase the school district's impact fees by 11 percent. They also approved a motion to increase the park district's impact fees by 11 percent. Both motions were approved by an 8-1 vote with Commissioner Ken George casting the dissenting vote on both motions.

Members of the Sycamore City Council were set to vote on the impact fee increases during their Sept. 19 meeting.

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City Manager Bill Nicklas said, earlier this year, members of the Ad Hoc Committee on Growth Management proposed increasing the impact fees for the school district and the park district, because the price of housing has increased significantly during the past year.

"Typically, that increase has been around 7 to 8 percent in the last five years, and it spiked up by about 10 to 11 percent," Nicklas said.

Members of the ad hoc committee also suggested raising the impact fees for the school district to help them overcome a projected

\$8.5 million deficit within the next 10 years.

Ken Andersen, vice president of the DeKalb County Building and Development Association, asked the plan commission members to postpone voting on the proposed impact fee increases to give the building and development association more time to discuss the issue. He said members of the DeKalb County Building and Development Association also are working with the city of DeKalb on its proposed impact fee increases.

"We just have a small staff. We're trying to do the best we can to address all these concerns with the different cities of DeKalb County," Andersen said. "We, respectively, request that these proposals be postponed or tabled until we can meet with school officials, not only concerning these fees but the proposed transfer fee tax referendum being proposed for consideration in the spring election."

Andersen also questioned whether the impact fees should be increased at this time. He said the school district's impact fees were increased last year, and the park district's impact fees were increased in February.

"By continuing to increase these fees at unnecessary levels, we may have to change our signs on the edge of town and have them read, 'Life Costs More in Sycamore,'" Andersen said.

Commissioner Dave Shipley, who is also a school board member, said the school district needs money from impact fees and other revenue sources to help pay for new school buildings and other future projects. He said the cost to have a new elementary school constructed is about \$9 million. The cost to build a new middle school is about \$20 million, and the cost to build a new high school is about \$50 million.

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"Impact fees are not enough to build new schools. It takes land cash contributions, and it's going to take things like the transfer fee tax to help with some of this funding," Shipley said. "It's a delicate balance between taxing the existing residents and the new construction coming in, and from the school district's perspective, they try to be prudent and conservative and look for creative ways with that balance, and I think impact fees, right now, are keeping up with it, and it helps put less of a burden (on existing residents)."

Commissioner Larry Steczo, who is also a member of the Sycamore Park Board, said the park district's impact fees were increased in February, so they would be in line with the school district's impact fees.

"An acre of land is an acre of land. It's just as important to the school district as it is to the park district," Steczo said. "When we raised our fees in 2005, we lagged behind the school district, and that's based on our comprehensive plan. The reason we're going to go along at the same time is because it's equally important to both entities that we assess the same value."

Andersen said park district officials have used impact fee money to help pay the rent for the community center, but they have not used the funds to develop parks in some of the newer developments, such as the Townsend Woods and Landahl North subdivisions.

"All these residents have paid their fees and still do not have a square inch of dirt to have a park on. Why not?," Andersen said. "While riding through Townsend Woods, I noticed that the neighborhood kids had laid out a baseball diamond on the street. Is this where we want our children to play? Why hasn't the park district purchased the land for these residents?"

Steczko said the developers decide whether they are going to donate money or land to the park district. He said the developers of the Townsend Woods subdivision offered to donate money instead of land.

"When a developer comes to us, we do not dictate do we get land or cash," Steczo said. "The developer dictates to us, here's land or here's cash. If the developer dictates land, they get a park in their subdivision... In Phase 3 of Townsend Woods, where it's rooftop to rooftop, the developer never gave one square inch of land of greenspace for a picnic table or a playground. That is the developer's choice. It's not ours."

Andersen said, while he was a member of the park board, the board members did not deal with developers in that manner. After the meeting, Andersen said, according to the preliminary plat for the Townsend Woods subdivision, which is dated January 1996, about 24.13 acres of land on the southeast corner of the subdivision is designated for park space, and 4.35 acres of land on the eastern section of the subdivision is also designated for park space.

"The developers come in. They make an offer. The park district has the right to decide, up or down, whether they are going to take land or cash in lieu of land, and it's never been any different than that," Andersen said.

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