

Use it or lose it: Bonita Springs has six years to use nearly \$700,000 for parks

By TARA E. McLAUGHLIN

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BONITA SPRINGS — Bonita Springs must spend \$691,000 on acquiring, building or improving parks in the next couple of years or risk losing it, the city's finance director said Monday.

The money, from residential building impact fees, comes with a six-year time-frame in which to allocate it, Lisa Griggs Roberson said.

Most of this money, which flowed in during the building boom, must be spent by 2012 and 2013, she said, and once spent, it will take years to replenish.

"Until we return to a different level in residential construction in our city, we will not see numbers like this again," Lisa Griggs Roberson said.

City Council took stock of its parks and recreation facilities and the status of current projects Monday.

It will prioritize projects at a later workshop.

The city's more than 120 acres of parks include the 12-acre Riverside Park with a band shell and dog park and the 6-acre soccer complex whose leagues boast nearly 500 members.

Keith Larson, manager of the city's parks and recreation department, said about 500 people use the city's parks system every day.

A report of the city's capital projects during the 2009-10 budget cycle tallied \$1.2 million, with most budgeted to be paid for through grants or by Lee County.

Private donations were also budgeted for some projects.

The city planned to spend \$474,000 in impact fees, though some of those projects had not been completed, such as \$75,000 to build a road into River Park and \$150,000 for bathrooms at Marni Fields.

The impact fees come with deadlines and, sometimes, grant-matching requirements.

Mayor Ben Nelson said the city may need to forego those dollars if the projects and requirements aren't compatible with the city's plans.

Some council members tried to plug their pet projects.

Councilwoman Janet Martin requested the city spend \$20,000 on metal roofs for three buildings at the city's Nature Place.

"It protects the investment the city has made in that property," Martin said.

Councilman John Spear, who said he has pushed for years to have a comprehensive approach to managing the city's parks projects, said it's likely the list of projects will exceed available dollars.

"The word 'no' is going to have to be said once or twice and that's where it's going to be difficult," Spear said.

Councilman Bill Lonkart said the upcoming workshop should also address expenses, a point on which City Manager Gary Price cautioned City Council.

Price said council members should consider not only the cost of a project but also its ongoing maintenance.

The city budgeted \$1.5 million in parks maintenance for the current fiscal year, according to Griggs Roberson.

If the city does not spend the impact fees within the six-year window, whomever paid the fee could apply for a refund.

Griggs Roberson said she has yet to see such an impact fee refund.

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