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### Local News

# City talks homebuilder suit...in private

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A legal fight between local homebuilders and the city of Bakersfield took a quiet step forward Wednesday evening when the city council agreed to postpone consideration of three large projects, including the Canyons, until they better understand the lawsuit's impact.

No one from the council or the public commented on either the postponement or the litigation, although Bob Decker, top staffer for the group suing the city and county over an increase in traffic impact fees, sat in the audience. The Home Builders Association of Kern County filed a complaint Aug. 4 saying the traffic study underlying the fee hike is invalid, among other things.

Councilmembers voted 6-0 to wait until their next meeting on Sept. 9 to consider the developments; Sue Benham was on vacation. The Canyons, a controversial 889-acre housing tract on northeast bluffs near the Kern River, was the largest of the three projects stalled by the suit.

The council later discussed the situation behind closed doors -- routine for items involved in a lawsuit -- though the private talk lasted more than two hours, an unusually long time. No specific action was reported afterward other than the council giving "direction" to city staff.

Homebuilders were upset by a hefty fee increase approved during the depths of the battered housing market. The new traffic impact fee runs nearly \$13,000 per new home, adding thousands per unit in up-front builder costs.

City and county leaders say they needed to update the fee in order to generate local matching funds for \$630 million in federal transportation money bagged by former Rep. Bill Thomas, the Bakersfield Republican, before he retired.

In other business, Councilmember David Couch asked staff to look into PG&E billing policies. Some residents with new "smart" meters have told him they were unknowingly billed only for gas the first month, then received two electric bills the following month. Some faced hundreds of dollars in unexpected costs, he said.