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Developers in Lower Macungie to pay more toward future road improvements

Some claim impact fees are too high and could hurt local economy

By Patrick Lester

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Taxpayers in Lower Macungie who have shouldered the brunt of many costly township road improvements over the years will be getting much more help from developers when paying for future projects.

Township commissioners Thursday night approved a transportation improvements plan that requires developers to pay a share for future road projects that could carry an overall price tag of up to \$37 million over the next decade.

Developers would pay so-called impact fees of as much as \$3,298 for every new rush hour vehicle trip its estimated would be created by future construction. Some landowners say that price tag is exorbitant and could have an adverse effect on the local economy.

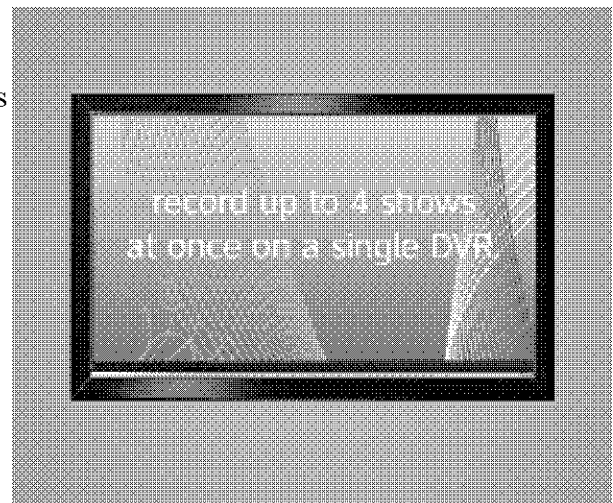
But other township taxpayers welcome the fees, saying developers should have been forced to chip in years ago when Lower Macungie was in the midst of a building boom that has made it the third-largest municipality in the Lehigh Valley.

Several other Lehigh Valley communities already impose similar fees, allowed by state law and imposed after lengthy and costly studies. The money is typically used for traffic lights, road widening and turning lanes.

McMahon Transportation Engineers & Planners of Fort Washington, the firm hired to analyze traffic and roads and come up with a dollar amount for the impact fees, projects 1,800 new housing units over the next decade, which will create about 4,100 new vehicle trips between 4 and 6 p.m.

The firm recommended a transportation impact fee of \$3,298 for each additional vehicle trip created in the eastern portion of the township and \$2,714 in the west.

So, for example, if a developer built five homes in the eastern section of the township that were



estimated to generate 10 new vehicle trips a day during rush hour, that developer would have to pay \$32,980 up front for future road improvements.

"Developers have enjoyed a free ride forever," said Jack Tibbetts, who serves on the township's Impact Fee Advisory Committee. "Most of us here are not excited about development of any kind. The folks who live here now have a rightful place at the table to determine their quality of life in the township."

Allentown attorney Joseph A. Zator II, speaking on behalf of some of the township's larger landowners, including the Catholic Diocese of Allentown and Jaindl Land Co., claimed a "gerrymandered" process unfairly maximized the builders' contribution.

Of the \$37 million worth of projected road improvements in the plan, developers would pay about \$13 million, the state \$14 million and township taxpayers \$10 million.

Those estimates were determined by an analysis of expected growth in the township and the improvements needed to accommodate it.

Robert Wendt, a township resident and regional coordinator for the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp., suggested the additional expense for developers could deter businesses from coming to or expanding in Lower Macungie.

He and others said that any expectations that the state Department of Transportation would contribute to the cost of future road improvements are unrealistic.

William Erdman, the township's engineer, said there is little hope of the township prying a cent from PennDOT, although Peter Nelson, the township's solicitor, said some municipalities have been "extremely successful" securing state dollars.

Officials acknowledged it's probably unrealistic to expect they would undertake all \$37 million worth of projects.

Nelson said the imposition of a set fee -- the board will have to pass an ordinance officially establishing them -- would not preclude the township from negotiating the fees with developers.

Patrick.lester@mcall.com

610-820-6764

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