

baton rouge, louisiana



Panel moves impact-fee plan forward

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GONZALES -- A citizens committee charged with creating an Ascension Parish development impact fee estimated to generate \$2.5 million annually moved the proposed ordinance forward Tuesday.

After months of study and debate, the ordinance also leaves key questions unsettled and homebuilders watching with a wary eye.

With passage, which was unopposed by the committee despite the lingering items, the document heads now to the Ascension Parish Council and possibly a more public phase of review.

Councilman Kent Schexnaydre said the proposed fee ordinance could appear Monday before the council's Strategic Planning Committee, which he chairs.

The document sets up a sliding fee scale based on the type and size of new structures to be built, creates the procedural mechanics of implementing the fees, grandfathering in existing businesses and homes as well as developments in the approval pipeline and phases in fees for 2006, a final draft document circulated Tuesday night shows.

The fees, which were calculated by a consultant based on road needs, development impacts and the parish tax base, would be used for transportation improvements, including state highways.

That consultant's report, from Duncan Associates of Austin, Texas, has estimated the fees would generate \$2.5 million annually. Hughes has said the fees could be used for matching money with federal highway dollars.

As proposed, the fees range from \$266 per 1,000 square feet for new private elementary/secondary schools to \$8,912 per 1,000 square feet for new banks.

Fees for new single-family homes fees range from \$1,489 for those less than 1,000

square feet to \$2,169 for those 4,000 square feet or greater. As proposed, public schools have been exempted.

Hugh Bond, a builder and president of the Capital Region Builders Association, ticked off a list of problems, including that it won't generate enough money versus a new tax but would create a "false sense of achievement."

Beyond those points, though, Bond and Lynda Evans, the association's executive vice president, said they had concerns that passage in Ascension would open the door to fees in other parishes, as well as for different kinds of impact fees in Ascension.

Evans, who, like Bond, is a member of the committee, said the association wasn't opposed at this point.

"We plan to stay on top of it," Evans said.

The ordinance leaves to the Parish Council two items that caused divisions on the committee: at what point in the development process the fees will be collected and the number and boundaries of fee districts.

As currently written, the ordinance calls for the fee to be collected when the occupancy permit is issued, essentially pushing the upfront cost to the homebuyer. The committee had previously weighed collecting the fee when the final plat is approved, which would affect developers, or when a building permit is approved, which would affect builders.

Development attorney Charles Landry, one of the consultants used to develop the ordinance with the committee, said the occupancy permit language was left as a "placeholder" but the final decision will be the council's.

Landry also said he is planning to add a section that creates an incentive for developers to "warehouse" credits for the end user by doing improvements upfront.

That way, although the new homebuyer may pay the fee, they and builders trying to sell homes can use the warehoused credit against the impact fees, Landry said.

The ordinance also does not specify where or how many fee districts the parish should have.

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