

County traffic impact fees stalled again

By *ILIMA LOOMIS, Staff Writer*

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WAILUKU – The county has waited 20 years for traffic impact fees, and it appears the wait isn't over yet.

A key study needed to implement the fees was completed in 2003, but County Council members say the \$187,000 study now is outdated and needs to be either updated or redone.

Council Member Gladys Baisa, who heads the Planning Committee, said last week she'd ask the Budget and Finance Committee to discuss funding a new study.

Just over a year into her first term on the council, Baisa said it was worth taking the time to redo the study and correct inadequacies in it, but acknowledged she was "appalled" at how long the traffic fees had languished.

"When I saw this had been on the books for 20 years, I thought this was something we should work on," she said. "I didn't realize how complicated it was."

The council passed laws in 1988 and 1989 requiring developers in South and West Maui to pay for road improvements. County attorneys said early on that a study was needed so that fees would be based on specific needs, not set arbitrarily. It took 15 years to complete the study, which has been pending before the council for four years.

"I'm feeling very frustrated," said Council Member Jo Anne Johnson, who holds the council's West Maui seat.

She said the 2003 study by Kaku Associates, instead of bringing the county closer to setting traffic fees, brought up new issues for debate, including whether to expand the fees beyond South and West Maui to the rest of the island.

The study also did not take into account the possibility of using the fees for public transit, she added.

"I just find it absolutely not acceptable," she said.

While Johnson said she agreed the study should be updated, she wanted to find a way to adopt "interim" fees in the meantime.

"We've already been waiting since 1988 – that's long enough," she said.

The Kaku fee study analyzed the costs of 13 state and county road projects, and estimated the amount of traffic that would be added to roadways by different kinds of developments. It

proposed setting a fee schedule for different kinds of projects in different parts of the island based on their expected impacts on county roads.

County Public Works Director Milton Arakawa said the council needed to decide a number of outstanding issues before setting the fees. High among the issues was the question of how the county could ensure that the money it turned over to the state actually would be used to advance Maui highway projects.

As the fees currently are proposed, builders would have to pay \$8,442 per residential unit in West Maui and \$4,625 in South Maui.

Baisa said those fees were “very low,” and hoped an updated study would reflect more accurately the costs of road improvements.

“We’ve got to get something substantial so it’ll make a difference,” she said.

Observers said the council should take the time it needs to get the fees right.

“I’m really happy about them going for another study,” said builder Dwayne Betsill. “I don’t have a concern about how long it’s taking. I know when they get the right information, they can make the right decision.”

He noted projects right now already are asked to contribute road improvements, and hoped the traffic fees, when completed, would take the place of those assignments.

Irene Bowie of Maui Tomorrow said she also felt it was right to update the study.

“I think it’s worth taking the time to make it more accurate,” she said.

Arakawa said it would be up to the council whether to initiate a new traffic study or just try to update the one that already exists.

But he said the council should make sure that the fees have a solid basis.

“This impact fee thing is quite an undertaking. If it gets enacted it’ll have a profound effect on future development,” he said. “We just want to make sure it’s done fairly.”

■ Ilima Loomis can be reached at iloomis@mauinews.com.

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