



Roseburg lowers water fees for residential sprinklers

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As the recent Columbia Gorge fire in White Salmon, Wash., showed, homes on hillsides are often more susceptible to fire.

A quick updraft can sweep a fire up a hill, and it may take a while for firefighters to follow up the twisty, steep roads leading to the homes. By the time a 9-1-1 call could be made, and the firefighters arrived on the scene, the whole house might go up in flames.

"Because of the accessibility, they're going to have a lot more damage to their homes when we get there," said Roseburg Fire Chief Jack Cooley.

The Roseburg City Council on Monday night reduced water charges for the higher-pressure pipe needed for sprinkler systems, thereby giving homebuilders an incentive to install residential sprinklers which will improve fire prevention.

Cooley said sprinklers are heat-activated, quickly dousing a fire and limiting the damage to just one room. Recessed in the ceiling, the sprinklers are inconspicuous and pop out when heated.

"Those heads, you don't even see them," he said.

Cooley planned to retrofit his own house with sprinklers, since the technology has gotten so much better in recent years. He pointed to Scottsdale, Ariz., as evidence of their effectiveness.

"They've not had a death in 25 years in a house that was sprinklered," Cooley said.

He said if developers can agree to install sprinklers, the fire department will allow for smaller pipes along the street, fewer fire hydrants and the construction of "skinny" streets that have become fashionable.

The new fee schedule now allows for three sizes of pipe for single-family homes and duplexes: 5/8-inch, 3/4-inch and 1-inch. All carry a system development charge of \$1,800 if installed with sprinkler systems.

A 5/8-inch pipe does not allow for enough water pressure to douse a fire. Before the change to the fees, a 1-inch pipe could be installed, but with a sticker price of \$4,500 upon installation.

A separate pipeline for fire service could also be installed alongside the domestic water line. This line would not carry system development charges, but it would have a flat monthly fee of \$7.24.

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"When people are putting in fire systems, they're basically punished for doing so," Roseburg utilities director Dick Hutton said Monday before the resolution was made. "The builders here are actually getting something."

Monthly usage fees will still be higher for the larger pipes than the standard 5/8-inch pipe because they put out more water, but there will no longer be the big upfront penalty for putting in pipe that will support fire service. The 3/4-inch pipe is also a new size available for home plumbing systems.

The flat monthly rate for a 5/8-inch pipe is \$8.28, while a 3/4-inch pipe will cost \$12.45. The rates for either pipe will go up 20 to 35 cents for inflation at the start of the new year.

On top of these flat rates, water costs \$1.31 per 100 cubic feet in Roseburg.

These rates will still apply when retrofitting older homes with sprinkler systems, but system development charges will be nil for existing homes, since they already receive water.

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