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Talk of impact fees postponed

Can Charlotte help build schools cheaper?

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The Charlotte City Council delayed discussion of impact fees on new development to pay for school construction, choosing a less controversial approach.

Instead, the council voted 8-3 for a set of strategies that would encourage and help Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to build schools more efficiently.

Mayor Pro Tem Patrick Cannon said there would be plenty of time later to talk about impact fees, at upcoming council retreats.

"Our schools need our help in building new schools. No doubt about it," he said. "Looking at the regulations that make school buildings so costly is a good place to start."

Democrats Nancy Carter, Greg Phipps and Warren Turner voted no.

"We should really carefully consider just having a discussion about it, just bringing all points on the table," Phipps said. "And I don't think we should shy away from that debate."

Cities and counties across the country -- and a few in North Carolina -- use impact fees or similar measures to pay for schools, shifting the cost of government from all property owners to newcomers.

Monday's vote was part of a convoluted process for studying how growth affects schools. The issue now heads back to an intergovernmental committee.

Republican John Tabor said the discussion should start with the CMS operating budget, including the cost of busing.

"Impact fees are fine," Tabor said. "But we ought to be looking at these other issues first, far quicker than looking for other ways to tax people."

In other business:

- The city will buy two south Charlotte houses, build a sewer line next to them, then sell them to new owners. The unusual expense was controversial, and was delayed as city officials talked with other residents in the neighborhood and assured them they would try to minimize the impact of the construction.
- The city's \$150.5 million package of new museums and theaters cleared another hurdle, as the still-evolving plan received an 8-2 vote of confidence from the council. Republicans Don Lochman and Tabor voted no on the financing plan. The package, funded largely with a proposed car-rental tax increase, would renovate Discovery Place, build two art museums, a new theater and a new Afro-American Cultural Center.

Government officials are working on a contract with Wachovia, which will build most of the projects as part of a South Tryon Street cultural campus.

Republican Pat Mumford, a Wachovia executive, abstained from the vote.

- The city will try a pilot program for cracking down more aggressively on cars parked in front yards. Since the city banned lawn parking 16 months ago, more than 3,500 people have complained. City officials have written 173 tickets and towed one car.

- The council unanimously approved the \$1.95 million sale of First Ward Park to developers planning a mixed-use project.

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