



WORD ON THE STREET

Tuesday, November 15, 2011 - Tacoma, WA

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Word on the Street

The latest news in and around Tacoma, Pierce County and South Puget Sound

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Post by [Christian Hill](#) / The News Tribune on Nov. 14, 2011 at 7:57 pm with [No Comments](#) »

The University City Council reduced Monday night the fee it assesses developers to help pay for improved streets to accommodate growth.

Other revisions to the traffic impact fee include offering credits and allowing payment of the fee in installments.

The revisions are intended to drive retail business into the city and, in some cases, would eliminate the fee altogether for retailers that generate a lot of sales tax.

The council vote was unanimous.

Councilman Ken Grassi said the changes are innovative and "give us the competitive edge we need to get Town Center going," referring to the mixed-use development the city has invested tens of millions of dollars into in an effort to grow the community's tax base.

"I think this will be something that other cities will borrow and implement themselves," he said.

Caroline Belleci supported the changes but expressed concern about businesses that would pay no fee and the tax credit that will take money out of the city's general fund.

"It's going to be important that we keep on top of this," she said.

Both City Engineer Jack Ecklund and City Attorney Steve Victor explained much of the anticipated growth in sales tax wouldn't come to the city without enacting the credit.

Shawn Hoey, government affairs associate for the Master Builders Association of Pierce County, praised the revisions as "very innovative, and it's something that is definitely leading the way."

But he asked for a two- or three-year suspension of the fee before the revisions are enacted to give developers a break in the poor economy. He was the lone speaker during a public hearing before the council vote.

Ecklund said such a proposal would create a \$900,000 funding shortfall, and Councilman Eric Choiniere said he had no interest in shifting that burden onto residents.

The fee program will continue to be self-supporting because while it will receive less money, it needs less, Ecklund explained. There are fewer additional cars on local streets each year due to the weak economy and construction costs are lower, he said.

The council approved reducing the fee to \$3,199 per evening rush hour trip from \$3,989.

In a further effort to snag retailers, the city will reduce the fee by 50 percent of the sales tax collected from the business in a year. The city will transfer an equivalent of the credit from its general fund to the fund supported by the fee.

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Another change gives all restaurants and most retail businesses, which generate a lot of sales-tax revenue, a 65 percent reduction in the fee as an incentive to build in University Place. A study found University Place residents spend two out of every three taxable dollars outside the city. The "sales leakage" traffic credit recognizes that the new businesses aren't creating new trips but instead capturing trips that otherwise would be headed outside University Place, Ecklund explained.

The city also is giving developers the option to pay the fee over five years instead all at once. It also will allow them to pay the fee when they apply to occupy a building instead of when they seek a permit to build it.

The council convened a six-member committee in January to make recommendations on the fee as part of its effort to boost economic development in University Place.

Its decision to charge the fee in 2008, 13 years after the city's incorporation, generated criticism from local developers and the business community. There have been several adjustments to the fee since.

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