

Largo forges ahead with analysis of impact fees

Moratorium on parks and recreational facility fees set to expire at end of year

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Article published on Wednesday, May 11, 2016

LARGO – In 2012, city of Largo leaders instituted a moratorium on parks and recreational facility impact fees in an effort to spur development. The move seemed to have worked as several developers of projects, such as the Gateway North apartment complex, said the lack of fees made it easier to build in Largo.

That moratorium, however, took a step closer to coming to an end after city commissioners May 10 agreed to move to the next phase of an analysis on how to best update the fees according to the latest data.

Parkland impact fees and facility/capital improvement fees are one-time charges to new development that are designed to fund the purchase of future parkland, including preparation such as parking and landscaping, and for the construction or expansion of recreational facilities.

The fees can't be spent on maintenance or renovations, but they can free up other funds.

Steve Tindale, CEO of Tindale Oliver and Associates, Inc., who conducted the analysis, said the study was necessary because the data used to formulate the previous fees are more than a dozen years old. So, the firm coordinated with city staff to review background information to identify and discuss technical, legal and policy issues in order to update the fee methodology.

He recommended combining the two fees into a single fee in order to create more flexibility on how the money can be spent and to be more consistent with industry standards.

The temporary moratorium was scheduled to expire in May, but the commission extended it last month in order to provide time for the analysis.

"I take great pride in our parks," Mayor Woody Brown said. "I think we need a way to continue to support and improve our park system. It's what sets our town apart from many others in the county."

Brown noted, however, that the fees put at odds two of residents' most important priorities: parks and development.

"I do think we have to recognize how we compare with the surrounding communities when we are competing for the investment of development," Brown said.

The city, though, could extend the moratorium for certain redevelopment districts, such as West Bay Drive or Clearwater-Largo Road.

The study featured an inventory of the city's assets, which included 19 city-owned parks for a total of 426 acres and a land value of \$85.3 million. The total facility value in the city is \$42.6 million. After breaking down the numbers, Tindale said for every person in the city, there is 5 acres of land, a number that is in line with surrounding communities such as Clearwater and Pinellas Park.

The cost to developers, however, is not comparable with nearby municipalities. According to the study, the fees could cost developers as much as \$3,294 for a single-family home, \$2,126 for an apartment or condo or \$1,807 for a mobile home.

The next highest, Tarpon Springs, charges \$1,041, for any of those developments.

"It is a little bit shocking to me to see that the fact that we are the highest of the people who do have fees in the county. And I do think that affects development," Brown said.

But Tindale said Largo isn't alone in putting a high priority on parks.

"We're seeing a resurgence," he said. "We do park master planning and I've got about four going on right now. ... There seems to be a resurgence right now in the whole parks program statewide."

The next phase will include finalizing the technical study, holding public meetings and discussion about how to phase in or discount the fees so developers have a chance to adjust.

In other news

Commissioners had no objections to a change in the blue laws after Brown said he was asked by St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman to take up the issue.

Pinellas County's blue laws prohibit the sale of alcohol in restaurants or stores before 11 a.m. on Sundays. The county has now asked its municipalities to determine whether or not they are in favor of moving the sale times to as early as 8 a.m. in a bid to gain uniformity.

Brown said both Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri and Largo Police Chief Jeffery Undestad didn't foresee any problems with the change.

Article published on Wednesday, May 11, 2016

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