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By SHELDON GARDNER (/authors/sheldon-gardner-2)

sheldon.gardner@staugustine.com

St. Augustine's mobility plan could lead to mobility fee

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CHRISTINA.KELSO@STAUGUSTINE.COM The City of St. Augustine is planning to change how it handles its residential parking program as part of its mobility project, which kicked off in 2016 and will resume this month.

St. Augustine's mobility project, set to resume in full force this month, is expected to open the possibility for the city to charge a fee to pay for transportation projects.

What a "mobility fee" or other fee or tax might look like isn't known. The possibility of a mobility fee has been discussed, though not extensively, in the past year.

The city can't begin planning for fees until there's a basis for charging them, but that's where the mobility plan comes in, officials said.

That first phase of the project in 2016, led by city consultant Littlejohn Engineering Associates, gathered information from studies and meetings with residents and outside agencies. The phase ended months ago when Littlejohn produced a "framework" for mobility planning.

The City Commission expected to review the framework in October, but Hurricane Matthew delayed the project, City Manager John Regan said. The review is expected to come Monday along with Regan outlining the project's next steps. The goal is to have a master plan of projects by April.

Regan said the city doesn't know when discussion about the possibility of a mobility fee might surface.

"I'm just being candid because part of the traditional mobility fee people are developing typically with raw land and they pay into a fund," Regan said. "Well, we don't have that. We don't have raw land. So that as a mobility fee wouldn't produce very much money. So we might have to be more creative. ... We might have a redevelopment fee. Maybe ... but we can't talk about a fee until we know what the fee is for and how much money it's designed to raise."

Regan also said, "It might not even be a mobility fee. It might be a discussion with the county on local option gas tax. We just simply don't know yet because we're not advanced enough to know what the solutions truly look like."

Concurrency and mobility fees are regulated by state law.

The city removed transportation concurrency from its Comprehensive Plan years ago, according to City Attorney Isabelle Lopez, quoted in a previous St. Augustine Record report. Concurrency allows for infrastructure improvements alongside growth, and impact fees can be charged to developers as part of that. The city opted out of charging impact fees because the type of road projects impact fees could be used for aren't feasible in the city.

Regan said in February 2016 that a mobility fee would be more flexible than a traditional impact fee.

The city of Altamonte Springs announced it would move from impact fees to mobility fees in 2016. The fees were to vary based on the location and type of project, according to the city.

"Mobility fees, unlike road impact fees, can be spent on projects such as trails, sidewalks, bicycle lanes, transit stops, intersections and road capacity," according to the city.

The mobility fees listed include \$996 for a single-family detached home outside an "activity center" or "transit oriented area."

Mayor Nancy Shaver said Littlejohn's framework shows that some data is still needed to justify a fee, which she said will be a "big part" of paying for larger and longer-term mobility efforts.

Vice Mayor Todd Neville said he'd like to see the city create a fee that won't require them to go to Tallahassee for approval.

"There's constant discussion about it," he said.

As for the mobility project plan, the city knows areas it wants to work on, but specific solutions will be hashed out with the community, officials said.

The goals include improving traffic flow downtown, improving access for walkers and bicyclists and improving satellite parking options.

The next steps will be overseen by a management team that includes city staff and volunteers Melinda Rakoncay and Steve Carter, who are St. Augustine residents.

Rakoncay is the president of the Neighborhood Council of St. Augustine, and she helped get neighborhood feedback for Littlejohn's framework. Carter has decades of experience in international consulting in "complex project management and change management," Regan said. He also served on the task force that helped with the first phase of the project.

Outside of staff time, the city doesn't expect a cost for managing the project, Regan said. Littlejohn will be used on an as-needed basis but isn't guaranteed any more money yet. The city agreed to pay them up to about \$119,000 in the last phase.

The city hopes to have a plan fleshed out by April of what projects it wants to do at least for the next year, Regan and Carter said. Regan said he also expects the city to start issuing some project contracts by then.

The mobility budget this fiscal year includes \$85,000 for shuttle programs, \$100,000 for crafting the mobility plan and \$600,000 for infrastructure and staffing, according to Meredith Breidenstein, city budget director.



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Tom Reynolds

2 days ago (edited)

Well this is a good story and full of info. What a waste of money !

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MARTY

2 days ago

Is this mobility study about creating more income for the city, or about improving mobility for tourists? After all, tourists who are stuck in traffic can't spend money. More fees for the city will do nothing to help local residents. Zip, Nada. The only way to improve life and "mobility" for locals is a huge decrease in tourist vehicles. But our city commission is focused on FEES instead of solutions that benefit local residents.

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