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Florence reduces fee hike

By MARK COWLING, Staff Writer

May 26, 2007

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Town cuts back impact charge increases scheduled to begin in August

FLORENCE - Town officials and their consultant made some changes and corrections to their calculations of Florence's new impact fees, to make the increases less severe when they take effect on Aug. 20.

The council also agreed to continue exempting the original town site or "town core" from any impact fees to encourage development there. Impact fees on new construction are intended to make new development pay the costs for their "impacts" on various town services.

The town's consultant, MuniFinancial, recently had proposed a commercial impact fee of more than \$10 per square foot, up from just over \$2 per square foot. The Town Council worried that such a steep hike would discourage the commercial development the town needs.

After further study, the consultant and the town were able to lower the proposal to \$6.32 per square foot. This was done by eliminating a new police station on the north side of town and increasing the size of one of three other police and fire substations planned; more accurately predicting growth in town employees; and charging water impact according to meter size instead of square feet.

Florence's new commercial impact fee would be \$126,360 on a 20,000-square-foot building. This is comparable to Florence's neighbors: \$127,673 in Casa Grande; \$154,447 in Queen Creek; \$177,799 in Coolidge; \$181,573 in Chandler; \$103,169 in Gilbert; and \$36,099 in Eloy.

Home impact fee

The new calculations had much less of an effect on Florence's impact fee on a single-family home. That fee will be \$11,427, only \$356 less than what was originally proposed. The town currently charges an impact fee of \$6,404 on a new home outside the town core.

Dave McMaster of the Homebuilders Association of Central Arizona argued to the council that the home fee was figured incorrectly. He said Florence's police impact fee on commercial property has been based on a 40-hour work week, when in fact the police protect commercial property around the clock. The result is a fee weighted too heavily on the backs of homebuilders, McMaster said.



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"I'm not arguing it's too high," only that the method of calculation is wrong, McMaster said. "We've never seen a calculation that's done this way."

But Mayor Tom Rankin responded that Florence is one of the safest communities in the state because of the Police Department. If possible, he would raise the fee still more so the town could hire more officers. He predicted that one day the commercial fees will go up while the single-family rate will go down.

But in the meantime, if people don't feel protected, they won't move in, Rankin said.

The single home fee puts Florence in between its neighbors, who charge \$12,290 in Chandler; \$13,407 in Gilbert; \$4,188 in Eloy; \$7,513 in Coolidge; \$8,113 in Casa Grande; and \$14,427 in Queen Creek. MuniFinancial noted that Coolidge, Casa Grande and Queen Creek are served by privately owned water utilities, so their fees don't include impacts to the water system. The Casa Grande City Council this week approved an increase to \$11,089.

Bonnie Bariola, a Chandler resident who is involved in local historic preservation, asked the council to consider reduced commercial fees for restored historic properties, to encourage people to purchase them and restore them.

Town core

The new ordinance originally proposed to begin charging impact fees in the town core if the construction was on a lot that never had town utilities in the past. If the project was an expansion, the new ordinance would only have charged fees on the new square footage.

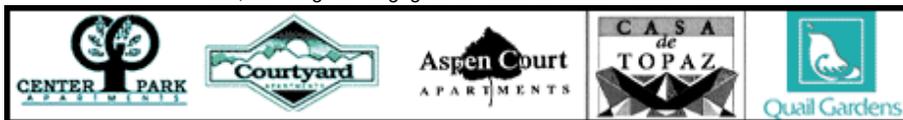
But Rankin said he would like to continue exempting the town core from all fees. After some more discussion, Vicki Kilvinger made a motion to accept the new ordinance with the old ordinance's exemption of the town core, and it passed unanimously.

By exempting the town core, the council agrees to pay for those impacts in other ways, most likely out of the town budget's general fund. Councilman Tom Celaya Jr. commented afterward in "Call to the Council" that this "kind of takes away from our ability to do special little projects to give back to the community."

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