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Fee would aid recreation

Developers would pay. City would use proceeds for improvements or to acquire land for parks.

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BETHLEHEM | The city would receive hundreds of thousands of dollars for recreation if council passed a law levying a fee on developers of \$1,500 per new home.

But the money can't be used to pay parks and recreation staff or for recreation programming.

State law mandates that any money collected with the so-called recreation impact fee must be used for acquisition of new parkland or for capital improvements, said Charlie Schmehl, vice president of Urban Research and Development Corp., the city's planning consultant.

The city is unlikely to be buying up new parkland anytime soon, meaning the money will likely go for capital projects, city Planning Director Darlene Heller said.

Heller said the city can use the money to rebuild a pool, or to add new tennis courts or basketball courts, or even to rip up existing basketball or tennis courts and reconstruct them. But the money can't be used for park maintenance.

Schmehl said the state law allowing Bethlehem and other municipalities to levy the recreation impact fee comes with several requirements. "The emphasis is supposed to be on major needs that arise because of construction of new homes," he said.

The city can buy new equipment – landscaping or even sports and recreation equipment – as long as the purchases are classified as capital improvements, Schmehl said.

Existing law levies a \$200-per-home recreation fee on residential development. That would increase to \$1,500 per home under the proposed law, which was given preliminary approval by council last week.

Industrial development would be subject to a \$1,200 fee plus 10 cents per square foot of building area up to 100,000 square feet and a nickel per square foot for portions greater than 100,000 square feet. Other nonresidential development would generate a \$1,500 fee plus 25 cents per square foot.

The casino complex planned for South Side would generate nearly \$110,000 in fees. That's based on the 170,150-square-foot casino, 200,000-square-foot shopping mall and 50,000-square-foot multipurpose center and does not include the 300-room hotel also planned for the initial development phase.

Martin Tower, eyed for conversion by developer Lou Pektor to 266 condominiums surrounded by 552 new town houses, would be worth more than \$1.2 million to the city. But parks planned throughout the 53-acre property would likely offset the fee.

The state law allowing Bethlehem to collect the fee also requires the city to update its recreation plan, which hasn't been modified since 1975, according to a draft of the document.

Council approved the draft last week but mandated that upon final passage it be immediately sent to the city's recreation commission for review and revision.

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