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Gables close to applying city's first impact fees on developers

By Risa Polansky

To offset the costs of development on the community, Coral Gables officials plan to begin levying impact fees on developers in the fall that could add as much as \$13,751 to the cost of building a single-family home and \$6,949 per high-rise residential unit.

Some charges are to apply as well to commercial development.

City commissioners last week gave the initial OK to an ordinance establishing the fees, joining the ranks of cities such as Miami.

It is the first time impact fees have been charged in the city though Gables developers do pay fees to Miami-Dade County.

The fee ordinance is to come up for final approval in August. If passed, it would take effect Sept. 10.

Developers whose projects are permitted before the fee is implemented will not be affected.

"New development causes impact on our society," said Mayor Don Slesnick. The fees are designed to "financially mitigate the impacts."

The city has had to hire police officers to patrol downtown and maintenance workers to clean it, he said. New, taller buildings require a new fire truck capable of serving them.

"Who better to pay for it than the people creating the need?" Mayor Slesnick said.

But, said developer Silvio Cardoso, president of the Builders Association of South Florida and United Homes International, "the end user pays for that."

The fees would make it "harder and less affordable for people to buy homes," he said, and "too much for anyone to build affordable or workforce housing."

Because Coral Gables is nearly built out, Mayor Slesnick said, he expects only a "small but meaningful financial impact" and said the city, which used a consultant to determine the fees, is not charging the "highest rate of return."

But, Mr. Cardoso said, "it seems like their numbers are higher than everybody else by a huge amount."

Fees vary too much throughout the state, he said, and the builders association is lobbying for standardization

Coral Gables' ordinance proposes a police impact fee of \$577, a fire fee of \$1,410 and a general government fee of \$1,574 per unit in a high-rise residential development, a multifamily development of 50 or more units.

Miami, which raised its fees in late 2005, charges \$95 per unit in a high-rise, defined as having 10 or more units, for police. It charges \$409 per unit for fire protection and \$239 for general services.

For a single-family home, Coral Gables is proposing \$1,142 in police fees, \$2,790 in fire fees and \$3,115 in general government fees.

Miami charges \$164 in police fees, \$704 in fire fees and \$413 in general-service fees.

Parks fees are closer — \$3,388 per high-rise unit and \$6,704 for a single-family home in the Gables, \$3,959 per high-rise unit and \$6,818 per single-family home in Miami.

Single-family home charges are not to apply to homeowners who build a new home on the same site as an old one, Mayor Slesnick said.

Police, fire and general-service fees in both cities affect commercial development.

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Gables is to charge 24 cents per gross square foot in police fees, 85 cents in fire fees and \$1.78 in general-service fees.

Miami levies on 50,000- to 100,000-square-foot office buildings about 2 cents per square foot of gross floor area for police, about 34 cents for fire and about 14 cents for general services.

"I think it will definitely deter people from going there (Coral Gables) to build," Mr. Cardoso said.

Should the fees inhibit development, the mayor said, he doubts residents will mind, pointing out that the city has long been wary of over-building.

"I don't want to use this as an artificial way to slow down development," he said. "I want to use this as a sincere way of charging developers for the negative impact they are making on our community by new construction. We with open arms welcome positive impacts."

While they come at an opportune time — with statewide property-tax reforms likely to slice into municipalities' budgets — the fees are not a direct response, Mayor Slesnick said.

Administration has been working on the ordinance for nine months, said Assistant City Manager Maria Alberro-Jimenez.

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