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Richland seeks financial plan for development

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The city of Richland is trying to figure out the best way to get developers to pay for road improvements that will be needed in the Queensgate area as more businesses continue to build there.

The land between Keene and Kennedy roads, along Truman Avenue to the city shops on City View Drive, and on Queensgate Drive to Interstate 182 is all zoned for commercial use, said Steve Stairs, the city's transportation engineer.

If all the empty lots are developed in the next 20 years, city officials say they'll have \$7.5 million worth of projects to pay for.

That will likely include a traffic light and turn lanes at Queensgate and Columbia Park Trail, a traffic signal at the westbound on-ramp to the interstate and more turn lanes where Queensgate meets Keene and Duportail Street.

One way to pay for the work is to create a mitigation fee district, which charges developers a fixed, up-front cost for the traffic their businesses will bring in, Stairs said.

The city already has a similar district that collects fees for residential development in parts of south Richland.

Home builders there pay \$967 per "peak hour car trip" when they get a building permit, and the money goes into a pot set aside for future street improvements, Stairs said.

West Richland has used a similar system citywide since 1993, said Public Works Director Roscoe Slade. The transportation impact fee makes new developments pay based on a formula and a citywide traffic study.

"We collect from every home that's built, every new business," Slade said. "Then we use that money to go out and construct needed improvements on our six-year transportation improvement plan, or as a match for state and federal grants."

The formula uses national standards to project the average number of car trips a home or business will generate during peak driving hours, Slade said.

But the system is flexible enough that developers can choose to submit their own traffic studies if they disagree with the city's traffic projection, he said.

Money from the fees has been used to match grant money for improvements to Keene Road, Bombing Range Road and Grosscup Boulevard, Slade said.

Developer Milo Bauder said West Richland has been pretty successful in getting grants with money he and others paid as impact fees.

If developers pay the full cost for future improvements to the Queensgate area, their fees could total about \$1,850 per peak hour trip, Stairs said. So if the formula shows a business would get 100 visitors during the most heavily-traveled hour of the day, that business would pay \$185,000.

Stairs said the benefit to developers is they know their costs up front, and they don't have to pay for a new traffic study.

Developers typically must pay for those studies as part of their application under the state Environmental Policy Act.

Businesses like Wal-Mart, Home Depot and Target, which have already contributed about \$250,000 each toward street improvements in the area, wouldn't have to pay again, Stairs said.

The city council has the final say on whether to create a fee district. The issue likely will be considered sometime this fall, Stairs said.

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