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Lower Pottsgrove eyeing traffic impact fees

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LOWER POTTS GROVE — It's unavoidable.

With more development comes more traffic.

With that traffic comes more wear and tear on roads, clogged intersections and shorter tempers.

So township commissioners are considering a proposal to implement a traffic impact fee which ensures that the developers who benefit from the increased traffic their projects generate, also pay for the costs associated with managing it.

Greg Richardson, principal and senior vice president with Traffic Planning and Design, said the fees are allowed under state law, but only to pay for costs associated with additional traffic, not existing conditions.

So, for example, traffic impact fees can be used to pay for improvements outlined in a capital improvement plan, but must be used "to add capacity. It can't be used for safety improvements," Richardson said.

These funds can also be used to pay for engineering and legal costs associated with projects that increase capacity, or to acquire land, or construction and even debt service related to the improvement.

In addition to putting the cost of transportation improvements on the developers whose construction drives the need for the improvements, the money generated from traffic impact fees also gives the township a pool of money to use as matching funds for PennDOT grants for improvements.

Implementing the fee is recommended in the township's master plan for the area around the Route 422 interchange at Sanatoga.

"What do you do if development like was just described in that plan turns out to happen? This allows you to throw the obligation to improve the transportation infrastructure back on the developers," Richardson said.

Another advantage, Richardson said, is that many developers would rather do the work themselves "and they can do it faster and 70 percent cheaper than PennDOT because they don't have to pay prevailing wage."

There are six basic steps to implementing a traffic impact fee, the first of which is forming a committee to decide if one is needed and, if it is, what areas it should cover and what rate to charge, Richardson said.

It ends with the adoption of a local ordinance implementing the fee.

Commissioner Bruce Foltz said although he does not oppose forming a committee, he does oppose immediately beginning to charge a fee, which the law allows the township to do once the committee is formed.

However, even after it was pointed out to him that the fee need not be charged until the ordinance is adopted, Foltz nevertheless joined Commissioner Stephen Klotz in voting against a motion to have township staff prepare materials for the formation of the committee.

Klotz said he wanted more information before voting on creating the committee and worried that charging traffic impact fees might scare away developers.

"We dropped the ball," he said in reference to development at the Sanatoga interchange area. "Limerick is 80 percent full and we've got nothing," said Klotz.

But Commissioners Chairman Jonathan Spadt pointed out that "Limerick charges a traffic impact fee, so I guess it didn't scare away development there."

Commissioner Mike McGroarty further pointed out that the committee will provide the answers to some of Klotz's questions.

Richardson said that in addition to Limerick, traffic impact fees have been implemented in many towns, including New Hanover, North Coventry, East Coventry, East Vincent and East Pikeland.

“We’re doing the residents a disservice if we don’t” implement a traffic impact fee, “because then all the costs of paying for the traffic improvements will fall on them,” McGroarty said.

Commissioner Jim Kaiser joined Spadt and McGroarty in supporting the exploration of the idea.

Calling it “a user tax,” Spadt said “it’s a cost of doing business. And if its reasonable, I think developers will be willing to deal with it. And maybe, this scares away the development we don’t want.”

The three-commissioner majority agreed to have materials prepared by the staff to vote on creating a traffic impact fee committee and a vote on getting it started is expected at the next commissioners meeting, which is on Sept. 5.

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