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## Residents speak out against Frenchtown Fire impact fee proposal

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by Richard Werst

Just say no to new taxes.

That was the message from area residents to the Frenchtown Fire board Tuesday night during an informational meeting on the fire district's impact fee proposal.

Frenchtown Fire is among the first jurisdictions seeking to impose impact fees, which are allowed under Montana law. The district's proposal, which has been promoted over the last several years by Chief Scott Waldron, would collect about \$2,000 on each new single-family dwelling within the district.

That money would be used to build a new fire station near the Smurfit-Stone mill and to buy a new ladder truck, according to the proposal.

Missoula County is also considering its own fees on top of the fire district fees.

Local residents on Tuesday night said they viewed the impact fees as just a roundabout way of raising taxes.

"We just voted on it and turned it down," said Carl Saunders. "The democratic process said, 'Hey, we don't want a mill levy for this thing, we don't need it.' Now [Frenchtown Fire] is turning around and saying, 'Let's have it anyway, let's just implement impact fees. They wouldn't pass a mill levy, so heck, let's just put impact fees in and we'll build it anyway.'"

Voters in November 2006 rejected a fire levy increase by a margin of 58 to 42 percent.

Carl went on to question whether the department was maximizing the facilities and people it has now.

"Will our fire department not absorb another ten percent with the existing people?" Carl asked, adding that that was what needed to be done in the business world where a company is not supported by taxes. "We maximize our people before we look at adding people," he said.

Even though impact fees are only assessed on new construction, another person pointed out, down the road they do affect everyone's taxes by virtue of the cost to maintain the additional equipment and buildings.

"This reminds me of the fella that went out and bought a horse," was an analogy made by another audience member. "It was a great horse but he had no idea about what it costs to keep a horse."

The impact fees only pay for the station and the truck, he said, and asked: "How are you going to staff it? How are you going to pay the monthly bills? You're going to have to hit us in the wallet again. A tax by any other name is still a tax and I have never seen a temporary tax go away."

It affects everybody in this community, Trustee Mitchell Hicks said, criticizing the fire board for making the decision rather than putting the question to a public vote.

"How did it boil down to five people to tell the whole district how much it's going to be?" he said, followed by a round of applause from the audience.

"I'm definitely against it," Hicks said, "I think that it's the biggest injustice that we could do to this community.

Something slipped through the cracks here, he said, pointing out that only a small percentage of the public knew anything about the impact fee issue and what it was going to cost them.

Saying that he knew how the current board would vote, Hicks asked if the vote could be reversed after it passed. Dwayne Pierce Guthrie of TischlerBise, a consultant for Frenchtown Fire and the county, told Hicks that if a new board were to be elected at a later date, the impact fee decision could be changed.

George Sherwood pointed out that Missoula Rural Fire District had planned well for their district, but that they hadn't planned on the city of Missoula coming in and taking away their tax base.

"The city follows that sewer," he said, "and wherever that sewer goes that city is going to take that over."

He emphasized the need for caution, saying that he thought all of the new development at the Wye would eventually be taken over by the city and they would be taken away from the Frenchtown Rural Fire Department tax base.

"I think that we need to consider all of the things that are going to take place by Missoula," he said, before making any decisions.

Ken Crawford said he was already paid \$80,000 in fees for a five-lot subdivision and is nowhere near being complete.

Following the discussion about the impact fees proposed by Frenchtown Rural Fire, Dale Bickell, CFO Missoula County, gave a short talk about the concurrent study on impact fees that is being conducted by the county.

Those fees would help fund public safety and the criminal justice system, he said, adding that if they were passed the county fee would be separate from those proposed by the fire district.

Asked whether the county would approve impact fees this fiscal year, Bickell said that he felt it would be a little optimistic to think it would be done that soon.

"The Impact Advisory Committee we have needs to review the fees and make a recommendation to the commissioners," he said, adding that they hope to do that in the next couple of months. There would be a couple more public meetings before the commissioners actually vote on the issue, he said.

Tim Phillippi, one of the last people to speak, told the board and the audience that he had moved here 23 years ago to raise his family. He said he moved with the understanding that resources in the district were not going to be the same as those in the metropolitan areas.

"You guys keep finding models in Chicago and St. Louis, and all these big cities," he said, "It doesn't work here – we can't afford it, there's not enough people to spread it out around. You're just weighting us down. There's fire sprinkler systems; there's new taxes for permits; there's new impact fees," he said. "You guys are just killing us. We can't pay any more, it doesn't fit. I can't make enough money. I run a small business and we are taxed to death ... you guys are taking more and more and more."

Tom Mahlum, chairman of the Frenchtown Fire board, told the group that the board had not yet made a decision on the impact fees.

"We have not got into any of this, as a board," he said, "We have a lot of work to do to look at this and read through it. We're all in this together. We'll just take our time, take public comment and listen to everyone."

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