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Delay was right for park fee hearing

The Olympia City Council has a reputation for getting bogged down in bureaucratic processes. If there's a study to be conducted or a consultant to hire, the council will find a way. Those studies and consultants have a way of drawing out the decision-making process — sometimes months, even years.

There are some critics within the community who say were it not for the Nisqually earthquake in 2001, the Olympia City Council would still be studying the feasibility of building a new Fourth Avenue bridge.

That's why the proposal to increase impact fees for parks comes as such a shock. Yes, the amount of the proposed rate — \$6,395 for a single family home — is a shock. But what was more alarming was the fact that the fee increase was rushed to the City Council without adequate community discussion.

Councilmen Jeff Kingsbury, Joe Hyer, Doug Mah and Mayor Mark Foutch were right to derail the park fee increase public hearing and ask for more time and more information. It's ridiculous that only the three members of the council's finance committee — TJ Johnson, Karen Messmer and Laura Ware — were briefed on the fee increase before it was scheduled for a public hearing on Tuesday night.

"It's bad timing and bad process," Kingsbury said of the lack of information and community discussion before the public hearing was set.

He is right.

This is an issue with broad ramifications — for the acquisition of park property, for the development of park lands, but also for affordable housing. Developers will pass that \$6,395 fee directly onto the homeowner in the form of a higher home sale price. This at a time when the American dream of home ownership already is beyond the reach of many citizens.

There's a side issue, too, and that's the effect a higher park fee will have on the city's own quest to bring more housing downtown.

How many times have members of the City Council been told that downtown housing simply does not pencil out for would-be developers? Yet under this proposal, the cost of parks impact fees for downtown multifamily housing would jump 206 percent, from \$840 per unit to \$2,569 per unit.

The proposed increase in park impact fees also runs counter to a recent City Council action to reduce school impact fees in order to encourage downtown housing.

"It seems to me for a City Council that's very interested in developing downtown, this would be a very significant deterrent to that," said Laura Kimbrough, executive officer of the Olympia Master Builders. She, too, was caught completely off guard by the proposal.

Olympia residents appreciate timely decision making by the City Council. But city officials clearly got ahead of themselves with the proposed park impact fee increase. It's good that the fast-moving train was derailed long enough for a thorough community airing. There's too much at stake — for public parks and private housing — to rush to judgment.