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Bellingham City Council approves impact fee exemptions for certain projects

Ruling could be used to entice NOAA to city's waterfront

SAM TAYLOR / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - City Council members Monday, April 13, approved impact fee exemptions that could potentially be used to entice NOAA to Bellingham's waterfront.

In a 7-0 vote, council members approved adding language to the ordinances for parks, schools and transportation impact fees that would allow for exemptions of the City Council determined a project served a "broad public purpose."

In the case of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the city and Port of Bellingham are trying to attract the organization's marine operations center to the Bellingham waterfront.

Currently stationed on Seattle's Lake Union, it's estimated that NOAA would provide 78 shore side employees, plus 178 researchers and onboard crew members assigned to NOAA's marine operations center's six large vessels. The economic impact is estimated at about \$19 million a year. The Lake Union lease is up in 2011.

Only the transportation impact fee exemption would apply to the NOAA project, said Jeff Capell, an assistant city attorney. The parks and school impact fees exemptions would only apply to residential projects. Taxpayers would foot the bill for any fees that a developer doesn't have to pay, with the money coming from city coffers.

Neighborhood activist Rick Chartrand spoke against the change to city code Monday night, arguing that the city's leaders shouldn't have the power to pick and choose who is exempted from such fees.

"This ordinance is like me giving Mayor Pike a blank check and saying 'go for it,' because that's what this ordinance will allow and will have your checkbooks basically given to the city as they wish," Chartrand said as he looked at the audience.

The city already has an exemption of those fees in place for low-income housing projects, but state law also allowed for projects that serve a broad public purpose as well. The city hadn't adopted that state language before.

NOAA officials say that they'll decide in August who the winning bidder is for the operations center. It's unclear how many other jurisdictions have also bid on the lease of the center as the federal government won't release that information at this time.

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