

City challenges county road fees



Written by News Staff

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NEWMAN - Local leaders are voicing their opposition to Stanislaus County's proposed regional transportation impact fee, or RTIF, which officials at City Hall say would tap the pocket books of new businesses and residential developers without delivering significant benefits in return.

The county board last week agreed to hold off on adoption of the fees in hopes of ironing out the differences, but Supervisor Jim DeMartini on Monday reaffirmed his support for the fees as presented.

City Manager Michael Holland said the city's issue is not with the fees per se, but with funding a plan that calls for no traffic improvements in the immediate Newman area.

"Our issues are with the projects identified," said Holland, pointing out that the widening of portions of Crows Landing Road and the bridge over the San Joaquin River to three lanes is, geographically, the closest project to Newman.

"There is not one project within six miles of our sphere of influence," Holland told Mattos Newspapers. "Out of the roads projects portions of the fee, three quarters of the money goes to the North County Corridor project (a freeway linking Highway 99 to Oakdale), and 100 percent of the state highway segment goes to interchanges which support the North County Corridor and that area."

Holland said that he cannot support the collection of any fee which does not provide a local benefit in return.

"I have to be able to justify collecting that fee. At this point I cannot endorse collection of that fee," he stressed. "There is no connection between the projects being proposed and a fee being imposed in Newman."

According to DeMartini, the proposed fee simply replaces an existing fee structure and actually represents a slight reduction in costs.

Holland said the proposed RTIF is \$3,813 for single family homes and \$1,747 per every 1,000 square feet of "small retail" projects, the classification into which most Newman projects would fall.

The city manager noted that improvements to Stuhr Road were once on the county's long-term project list linked to the previous transportation fee but have since been dropped.

"Why was that knocked off, and when was that knocked off?" he wondered. "If the county was collecting a fee for that program, does it have an obligation to either refund the money or do the improvements?"

DeMartini defended the proposed fee as regional in nature, and said the project lists are ever-evolving rather than carved in stone.

"We have to look at the county as a whole, and these are regional fees," said the supervisor, who represents the West Side. "You have to get away from thinking of the local municipality only."

The argument that a fee is invalid because it may not provide immediate benefit is flawed, DeMartini added.

As the county works its way through the transportation project list, other areas will be added to the list.

Projects such as the Stuhr Road improvements were dropped because the county wanted to focus on those which are more likely to be realized in the shorter-term.

"We have just taken off those that aren't going to be addressed right away. We didn't think it was realistic to be charging fees for something that wasn't going to be built for many years. There are more pressing projects, but it will be coming back on," DeMartini stressed. "When it does, it will cost \$50 million to rebuild that road. Then the people from Modesto will be complaining that their money is benefiting Newman."

And, he added, there are benefits to Newman residents from the proposed plans.

"If you're from Newman going to Modesto, the roads you're going to be traveling on are what this fee covers," the supervisor pointed out.

Holland said one option that may be acceptable for Newman and other protesting cities is to essentially district the fees, so that money being collected at one corner of Stanislaus County isn't paying for road improvements in an opposite one.

But DeMartini suggested that approach would derail the county's long-term ability to complete important transportation projects. Having enough money to leverage state and federal funds for the North County Corridor is crucial, he said by way of example.

"If we throw out our regional transportation plan, we don't get that money," DeMartini emphasized. "We would end up with a lot of little projects with no state funding."

DeMartini said he was disappointed with the last-minute objections to a plan that has been two years in the making.

Holland, though, said the concerns raised have merit and must be addressed.

For one thing, he stated, the fees could constrain development as the economy rebounds.

“You have to understand that we will be targeting smaller, more regional types of business as opposed to national companies locating here,” Holland explained. “For small, regional businesses, fees play a large part in that.”

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