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City council rejects fire impact fee proposal 4-2

Published on Wed, Feb 10, 2010 by **Tara Nelson**



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Blaine taxpayers and current residents could be forced to pick up the tab for increased fire and rescue services as a result of new development following a recent city council decision.

In the regular meeting Monday, Blaine City Council voted 4-2 against a resolution that would have created a framework to impose impact fees for increased fire and rescue services through North Whatcom Fire & Rescue Service (NWFRD).

The resolution would have allowed the council to work with fire district to develop mitigation fees for fire and emergency life support services for the city of Blaine. The new fees would not be borne by current residents but by new developments that are subject to review by the State Environmental Policy Act.

Whatcom County has already adopted the fire district's capital facilities plan for the rest of the district that will create the framework to include similar fees.

Council members Jason Overstreet, Bonnie Onyon, John Liebert and Scott Dodd voted no citing concerns that the fees could scare away new development and likened the district's request to "extortion." Charlie Hawkins and Paul Greenough voted yes. Harry Robinson abstained from voting.

Dodd said six years ago, the city was contracting with NWFRD at a cost of \$600,000 for fire service but the district has since doubled that amount.

"We give them \$1.2 million," Dodd said. "I think that makes a big point that we give them a lot of money, where does it go? They get a substantial amount from us already. I don't think this is something we should give in to." Overstreet agreed. "We've been asked to pretend the fire district isn't holding us over and that's frustrating to me," he said, adding that because the city voted last fall to remove impact fees for development, council should maintain that consistency. "I believe this is something constructive for the city and that we should maintain that consistency. For us to hit reverse thrusters does not make sense to me."

Harry Robinson disagreed saying he had concerns about the fire district appealing future development proposals based on the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review process.

The act requires developments to be concurrent with public services that are needed and to mitigate environmental, social or economic impacts to current residents. Robinson mentioned, for example, that in 2006, following the approval of Fred Bovenkamp's Horizons at Semiahmoo project, the Whatcom County Fire District 13 board of commissioners ordered their staff to no longer guarantee their ability to serve new construction projects in their area to the county in writing. Whatcom County Planning and Development Services normally requires such guarantees from independent taxing districts such as NWFRS before approving a project.

"I struggle with this as well but the thing that I tried to do is look at the advantages of voting no. Voting no could put the city at risk would be facing appeals from the fire district on the SEPA reviews with regards to new development.

"On one hand, we've done all we possibly can to spur development, to me, this is an anti-development if we vote no," he said. "It's nice to make a statement sometimes but it's important to recognize what the outcome might be. The fire district could say, 'without mitigation fees, this project is not going to happen.'"

Liebert suggested putting forth a vote to the public.

"The people need to tell us what it is they're wanting and are willing to pay for," he said. "For us to make that decision without listening to what they have to say, I think that would be premature of us. If I'm Joe Smith down here, I'd be asking what the hell am I getting for that? I'm willing to put this to the public."

