

City drainage fee plan under development

by ROBIN FOSTER, CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT published February 15, 2011 4:36 pm
The city's plans to Rebuild Houston have hit the road, so to speak.

Approved by voters last November as Proposition 1, Rebuild Houston requires the city to switch to a pay-as-you-go method of funding street and drainage projects and will impose a new drainage fee on property owners citywide beginning July 1.

City Council is presenting the latest details about the program to Houston residents during annual Capital Improvement Plan meetings that began Feb. 14 and continue through March 9. The aim is to obtain feedback from residents that the Public Works and Engineering Department can use to draft an ordinance that will implement the program this year.

The program requires the city to impose a drainage fee that will raise \$125 million annually to fund street and drainage improvements. Other funding sources also will be used for the infrastructure projects, but the drainage fee and a new developer impact fee will help accelerate construction within a few years. The new fees will not be applied to existing debt.

As proposed, the fee is based on how much storm water each property in the city delivers to the public drainage system by calculating the impermeable surface area that does not absorb storm water on each lot.

When spread across all classes of property owners, the new fee would be 3.2-cents (\$0.032) per square foot of impermeable area. That amounts to \$4.06 or \$5 per month for an average home on a 5,000-square-foot lot that drains to an open ditch or a curb-and-gutter street, respectively.

But state law allows for some property classes to be exempt from drainage fees, including county property, school districts and religious organizations. Granting those exemptions would raise the fee on other classes of property owners, including homeowners. If all three groups are exempt, the drainage fee for homeowners grows to \$4.38 or \$5.38 per month for the average lot that drains to an open ditch or curb-and-gutter street, respectively.

Bob Schwartz, of Westbury, a longtime stakeholder in public conversations on drainage, cautioned city leaders that granting exemptions will require a new and unmanageable bureaucracy to qualify, then monitor them.

"It would be a never-ending process, and I hope you keep that in mind," Schwartz said Feb. 14, when the Rebuild Houston presentation was unveiled in a meeting of the City Council's Flooding and Drainage Committee.

"I hope you all can stand tall and resist the attempts to include exemptions," he told the committee.

But Charles Woods, an assistant superintendent for Alief school district, spoke in favor of exemptions for public schools as they face drastic cuts in state funding. By his calculations, the fee for Alief ISD would be \$367,000 per year, the equivalent to seven teacher salaries, 600 computers for elementary school labs or 21,000 miles of busing. It's also unclear still what

"credits" the district will receive for special drainage features it maintains, including detention, Woods said.

Gabriel Allen complained the fee for his company amounts to one employee's salary. Houston could continue to use some bond funding for infrastructure projects and reduce the impact on property owners, he said.

A lot to hash out

City Council members also are pressing for more answers from PWE staff about the program's implementation, including the impact on renters, credits for special drainage features like detention ponds or rain barrels, individual appeals to the city's calculation of the fee and an online tool that allows business and homeowners to calculate the fee for their property.

"I'm not going to apologize for the sensitivity of this matter. I still need those answers," said Wanda Adams, who represents District D.

But at-large Councilman Stephen Costello, who chairs the Flooding and Drainage Committee, believes the process is moving smoothly and on time.

"Most of the questions are really in the process and the draft ordinance, which council still has to work on," he said.