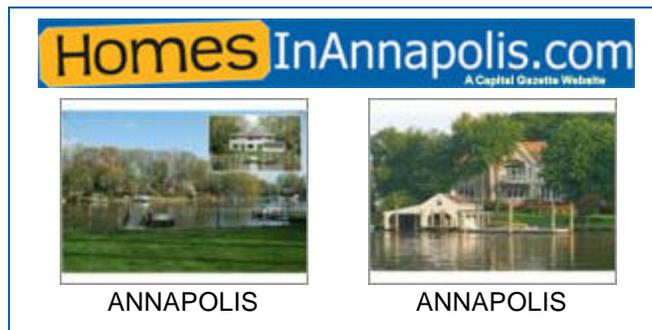


Council cans impact fee on home additions

By ERIN COX, Staff Writer

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Facing strong public opposition last night, the County Council killed a plan that would have charged homeowners an impact fee for adding onto their home.



More than 200 people turned out to listen or weigh in on the ongoing debate over the most dramatic impact fee rate increase in county history.

While a minority backed the plan, dozens of residents and business owners decried the charges, which add tens of thousands of dollars to new homes and millions to commercial projects, as too high, unfair or implemented too quickly to make building profitable.

But the provision that would have charged homeowners for increasing a home's square footage, a fee that would have run into the thousands, was among the most controversial.

Opposition was apparent even on the council.

"You shouldn't have to pay an impact fee to expand a home you already own," Councilman Daryl Jones, D-Severn, said from the dais.

The council voted 6-1 to remove the fee on home additions from the bill. Only Councilman Ed Middlebrooks, who opposes the entire proposal, voted against the change.

"I think it's a bad time for the government to be raising taxes," said Mr. Middlebrooks, a Severn Republican.

Last night's tweaks to the impact fee proposal set the stage for another round of public debate in two weeks, when the plan could receive a final vote. Discussion on how much to hike the fees has continued since January, and insiders expect talk in the coming weeks to be equally contentious.

The impact fee proposal was co-sponsored by County Executive John R. Leopold; Council Chairman Cathy Vitale, R-Severna Park; and councilmen Ed Reilly, R-Crofton, and Josh Cohen, D-Annapolis.

It increases fees on developers for building homes, office buildings, hospitals, marinas and other structures that would have an impact on area roads, schools or public safety facilities.

Anne Arundel's impact fees are among the lowest in the state, recapturing at most 22 percent of the cost to accommodate new growth, according to an analysis by the county's impact fee advisory committee.

Politicians and residents who support the plan argue that artificially low fees have forced taxpayers to pick up the tab for the cost of new growth. The diverted tax dollars, they say, helped worsen the county's \$1.5 billion backlog of school construction projects and millions in backlogged road projects.

"You're subsidizing development," Mr. Reilly told the at-times unruly crowd in the council chambers. "I don't know if that's what you want to do."

Commercial builders have complained that the proposed pace to implement the fees would hurt or kill projects in the works. That complaint ultimately led councilmen to propose a more slackened pace and a grandfathering provision to exempt projects that already have county approval. Those two amendments each passed the council by a 6-1 vote, with Mr. Middlebrooks voting against them.

Dozens of people testified on the proposal last night, a vast majority saying they oppose it.

Kira Smith, a representative of Continental Properties, told the council she had a project to build a fitness center in the Glen Burnie area. The fees would raise the costs

of project by \$800,000 and made it unworkable.

Kincey Potter of Annapolis was among those who spoke in favor of higher impact fees, saying that without them taxpayers would be left to pay the bill for the cost of new development.

Councilman Ron Dillon, R-Pasadena, said no one on the council wants to subsidize development, but deciding who to charge and how much is not simple.

In sum, councilmen approved five amendments to the legislation.

Mr. Dillon and Councilman Jamie Benoit, D-Crownsville, prepared the amendment to exempt home additions from impact fees. Mr. Dillon offered the amendment that would grandfather projects already under way, exempting them from the fees. Another change would phase in the fees more slowly. The remaining two amendments corrected oversights.

Although last night's public hearing was closed, the impact fee debate is far from over. A public hearing on the amended bill will be held during the council's next meeting at 7 p.m. Sept. 15 at the Arundel Center, 44 Calvert St. in Annapolis.

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