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In order to pass, drainage and street referendum costs must be clear to voters.

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Aug. 17, 2010, 10:07PM

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Now that Houston City Council has scheduled a November vote on a proposal to levy fees on Houston property owners and developers for a dedicated \$8 billion pay-as-you-go program for drainage and street renewal, it's time for some serious show and tell.

As the Chronicle's Brad Olson reported last week, city officials will spend the next month fleshing out the program structure and tackling the thorny questions of who will pay and how much. Those pesky details — or the lack of them — helped torpedo a similar plan in 2001, when opponents successfully campaigned against a measure they convinced voters was really a "rain tax."

Given Houston's history of flooded streets, businesses and homes over the past decade, the Chronicle agrees with the aims of Renew Houston, the organization of engineers that is backing the proposition. What we like most is the pay-as-you-go feature that eliminates long-term debt and maximizes infrastructure bang for the taxpayers' bucks.

As At-large City Councilman and engineer Stephen Costello explains, the city's streets and drainage system have long been grossly underfunded, with a waiting list for needed projects of up to a decade or more. "If you put the numbers to it, we'll never catch up," says Costello. "So the system is chronically decaying."

According to Costello, 65 percent of the city's existing street and drainage infrastructure is already beyond its useful lifespan.

Initial estimates are that the fee for the 20-year program would be \$60 annually for the average homeowner and \$1,080 for a typical commercial property owner. An unspecified development impact fee would be assessed developers based on the degree their projects affect density.

However, before endorsing the plan, we would like to see how much the actual program would cost, and how it would differentiate between properties with a large percentage of green space and trees that absorb runoff, and heavily developed parcels mostly covered by pavement and buildings. Should the low-income owner of a lot in a sparsely developed area pay the same fee as one with the same square footage valued at millions of dollars in upscale neighborhoods inside the Loop? Should public service nonprofits and schools and churches be exempt from the fee?

What will be the mechanism for deciding which street repair and drainage projects get fixed first? Historically, the infrastructure in poorer, minority neighborhoods in Houston has been neglected as more politically connected communities received higher priority. How can voters be assured that will not happen again?

Mayor Annise Parker is backing Renew Houston and promises that citizens will have the answers they need when they go to the polls. She also opposes exempting any group from the plan.

"If there's an exemption for one category, automatically someone else is going to have to pick it up," says the mayor. "I'm going to lay it all out for council, and then we'll walk through it."



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That kind of transparency is going to be essential to convince citizens to levy a new fee on themselves in these difficult economic times. There's no doubt we need to increase funding for street and drainage improvements, but the method must be fair and equitable. We look forward to examining a final plan well before election day.

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Mike_Houston wrote:

Just out of curiosity, I would like to know how much Stephen Costello received in campaign contributions from contractors that will do this work? How much did Annise Parker receive?

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kidbobo wrote:

I'd like to know how this tax will be affected if Houston doesn't change its development standards. For example:

- will the percentage of a lot that can be paved/covered by a building be defined?
 - will parking lots be gradually converted to more porous materials that reduce rain runoffs?
- Without changes to development standards, this is just another case of privatizing gain and socializing costs through taxes on all Houston citizens.

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andiamo wrote:

Mike - not just contractors, civil engineering firms too. And not just Costello, all top level city and county officials. The system is corrupt through and through local, state and federal government, lobbyists - all corrupt.

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