

Ascension takes another look at transportation impact fees

by David J. Mitchell

dmitchell@theadvocate.com

GONZALES — The Ascension Parish Council is taking another look at transportation impact fees seven years after an earlier effort to impose them fell short and nine months after voters rejected a half-cent sales tax for upgrading roads.

In a signal of renewed interest, a lawyer who played a key role in developing the failed parish impact fee plan eight years ago gave the council an overview this week on the fees counties use across the nation to have new growth pay for new infrastructure demands.

Council Finance Committee Chairwoman Teri Casso, who invited Baton Rouge lawyer Charles Landry to address the committee's meeting on Monday, said parish officials looked at impact fees last year, but slowed down to see if the public wanted the half-cent sales tax instead.

With more than a 65 percent turnout in the Nov. 6 election, 57 percent of Ascension voters rejected the "Lanes for Change" road tax.

Casso said officials are now looking at impact fees as a source of revenue needed to offset some of growth's costs.

As a first step, Casso said, she would like to let the council mull the idea briefly and, if support materializes, reconstitute an informal group of businesspeople and residents who met last year on impact fees.

"I think there has got to be a way to find a reasonable solution to the problem that growth brings, particularly in light of the amazing growth that Ascension is poised to undergo again," she said.

While she wants to be thoughtful, Casso said, she does not want a lengthy process before a plan can be brought forward.

"You know, it's not going to take years," Casso said.

Ascension was the fastest-growing parish in Louisiana between 2000 and 2010, achieving a 39.9 percent population increase during most of the decade, but saw that growth rate diminish after 2008 when the national financial crisis began.

Casso and other parish leaders have their eyes on a new wave of residential development as a result of several major industrial expansion projects announced since the start of 2012.

Mike Eades, chief executive officer of the Ascension Economic Development Corp., provided figures showing nearly \$4.6 billion in new investment and 855 permanent jobs announced by business and industry since the start of 2012.

Facing an earlier tide of growth after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Parish Council and then-Parish President Ronnie Hughes considered impact fees and a half-cent sales tax to fund road improvements in 2005 and 2006.

In June 2006, a council majority backed road impact fees on new residential and commercial development, but failed by one vote to garner the necessary two-thirds support for passage. After that failure, the sales tax never made it to the ballot again.

Impact fees generated opposition from homebuilders and other concerns that the fees would hurt commercial development and price some homebuyers out of the market.

Landry told Casso's committee that nothing has essentially changed since 2006 on the legality of impact fees and they remain as a common method nationwide of paying for new infrastructure needs, not existing ones.

"We still have a situation where government is being asked to do more and more, with less and less," Landry said.

Landry said St. Tammany Parish, which adopted mandatory impact fees in 2005, collected \$7.5 million in road fees and \$7.3 million in drainage fees through 2012.

His presentation drew mostly positive comments from the council, which has three members remaining from the 2006 council. But Councilman Todd Lambert, one of four who voted against the old plan, said in an interview he is opposed to impact fees.

He said the parish should try to stay within its means and follow the voters' will as expressed in the November election. He said he is irritated when council members say the fees will force new residents to bear the costs of growth.

Lambert said the fees also will hit current parish residents starting new businesses or buying new houses.

"I got a home. I will probably never buy another home," Lambert said. "It isn't going to affect me, but it's going to affect my kids and my grandkids."

Under the old proposal, the one-time fees were based on square footage and the kind of building being constructed. The parish impact fee imposed on a 1,800-square-foot single-family home would have amounted to \$1,726. Commercial impact fees would have been higher.

The fees would have been collected at the point that certificates of occupancy would be issued, an arrangement which drew opposition from homebuilders.

Rusty Golden, president of the Capital Region Builders Association, said his group is not categorically opposed to impact fees, but the "devil's in the details."

"Just to assess, you know, a fee on a builder is really not fair," Golden said. "Bottom line, it ends up rolling downhill to somebody, and the homeowners have to pay more is the catch."

Casso said the old ordinance, including the fee schedule, would get another look.

She disputes arguments that impact fees will hinder growth and said not having them could "leave millions of dollars on the table" in light of Ascension's coming growth.