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Lincoln councilwoman lobbies hard for higher development fees

Posted By [Deena Winter](#) On December 18, 2013 @ 7:57 am

By Deena Winter | Nebraska Watchdog

LINCOLN, Neb. – A Lincoln city councilwoman launched an all-out campaign over the weekend to convince Lincoln residents to turn out for a Monday public hearing revolving around development fees.



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FIGHTING FOR FEE INCREASE: Leirion Gaylor Baird pushed hard for an increase in impact fees this week.

But before you imagine hordes of Lincolnites converging on city hall with pitchforks to demand that their taxes go down, be aware: She was urging people to tell her colleagues on the City Council to increase the fees.

It's not every day you see an elected official clamoring for a fee increase, but this fee won't affect most Lincolnites' checkbooks. It's what the city calls an impact fee, which is charged to help offset the cost of development. Which is why home builders and developers and Realtors generally don't like the fees, and have successfully lobbied the Lincoln City Council to freeze them since 2007, citing the housing downturn.

But this year, **Leirion Gaylor Baird** thought it was time for a thaw. So she launched a social media campaign urging her supporters and others to attend a public hearing on the matter Monday. She was just elected to the seat in May, and her sophisticated, polished campaign has morphed into a sophisticated, polished constituent communication program.

To wit: Gaylor Baird sent her supporters a nice-looking email (complete with graphics) imploring them to contact the mayor and City Council members (with direct links to do so) and sign a petition on **Facebook**.

She also blitzed **Twitter** with a dozen tweets in two days, urging people to speak up or "increase the subsidy for developers."

Ultimately, her campaign failed to convince the council to lift the freeze – it voted 4-3 to continue the freeze for six months. But one local business leader says she did manage to ruffle a few feathers.

Coby Mach, host of **KFOR's** afternoon radio show, said some council members weren't happy about what he called an "attack" on developers, builders, the **Lincoln Chamber of Commerce**, the **Lincoln Independent Business Association** (which he heads).

Mach said Councilman **Carl Eskridge** had been working with developers on a compromise on how to pay for roads and sewers when she "blew it up this weekend."

The chamber didn't respond to a request for comment, and Eskridge said he disagreed with Gaylor Baird, but she did the courtesy of letting him know her position, he said.

"I felt that delaying the impact fees increase for six months was reasonable during this process and provided incentive for all parties to participate in upcoming community discussions," he said via email. "It was a disagreement but no ruffled feathers here."

Mach said some of Gaylor Baird's information was inaccurate, such as her characterization of impact fees as being for new houses "on the edge of town" when that's not always the case. Existing homes and businesses sometimes have to pay impact fees in connection with renovations.

Some expect **Mayor Chris Beutler** to veto the council's action – but the mayor's office would only say the mayor will comment later this week. (Probably Friday at 4 o'clock if he vetoes the freeze.)

Gaylor Baird didn't respond to a request for comment.

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