

Council needs to update growth impact fees

[Ron Fink/Commentary](#)

On Aug. 20, council member Dirk Starbuck tried to get the council to start a review of the impact fee schedule for new developments. He got no support.

This isn't the first time this issue has been discussed. Last Nov. 6, the council received a development fee impact status report as a part of the consent calendar.

That report clearly indicated that while recreation and park accounts were flush with money for new construction, more critical items like police, fire, roads and both the water and waste-water funds were either in the red or had minimal amounts. This should have alerted the council majority that something needed to be done, but no direction was given. In fact, they didn't even comment on it.

Development fees are the assessments charged to developers to pay the cost of the additional public infrastructure and services needed to support a project. Everything from additional trash cans to new fire stations, police cars and utility service trucks are funded by these fees.

The last time the fee schedule was analyzed for cost impact was in 2003, so the information used to justify fees is stale and needs a fresh look. Things have changed since 2003. Fuel costs a lot more, material costs have risen and so have wages.

And some fees haven't been adjusted in more than 30 years. For example, surely it costs a lot more than the current charge of \$19.80 to turn on utilities. They can't even answer the phone and fill out the work order for that much. The economy is rebounding. New projects are bound to be proposed, so the fee schedule needs to accurately reflect the costs of providing public services. In order to update the schedule, another study must be conducted. This will take several months and a couple of public hearings, so it's time to move the ball forward.

One of the issues council members can fix quickly is an action they took a couple of years ago to waive certain fees when the economy was stagnant. It's time to take another look at those waivers, and perhaps rescind them, or the city won't have enough funding to provide roads and other infrastructure these fees were supposed to fund. Some council members may view this as an anti-growth approach, and I usually don't favor tax/fee increases, but consider this - it costs money to provide all of the services covered by the impact fee schedule. The money has to come from somewhere, or the services can't be provided.

The city is growing and the public safety, water, electrical and waste-water systems need to expand to keep up with growth. There are commercial, industrial and residential projects on the horizon that require increased public infrastructure. If the council doesn't act soon, the opportunity to recover costs associated with these developments will have passed, and future councils will be left with a lot more budget red ink.

This is a mundane task that isn't as exciting as helping the library or opening a new recreation venue, but it needs to be done to assure that the public is served. Starbuck should raise the issue again. A plan is needed very soon to address this issue. There are a lot of factors that feed the impact fee schedule, and in order to fix it, many actions need to be taken.

I urge the council to act aggressively to prepare for the additional growth that is bound to occur as the economy continues to improve.

Ron Fink is a longtime Lompoc resident and a community activist. He can be reached by email at rfink@impulse.net.