

City revisits giving school impact fee break to developers

MONROE - A proposal reducing school mitigation fees is back, putting the Monroe School District at risk of losing dollars homebuilders pay to mitigate student growth.

The planning commission discussed the fees last week and is expected to make a recommendation whether to accept or deny the proposal at their Tuesday, Nov. 18 meeting.

Monroe wants to increase the discount from 25 to 50 percent, which would line up with most other cities in Snohomish County.

After nearly three hours of back-and-forth discussion among commissioners, it was the commission's general consensus they want to hear from the public before they make a recommendation to the City Council.

Increasing the discount decreases the amount of money allocated for the school district through building fees. Part of these fees are meant to mitigate the impact new families have on the school system.

The topic is a carryover from discussions last year. The city chose to put school mitigation fees into this year's comprehensive plan.

The school district came out strongly against the idea of increasing the discount last year. Monroe School Board members, Superintendent Ken Hoover and supportive residents are repeating their campaign this year.

"We know that new houses mean new kids in schools," School Board Member Nancy Truitt Pierce said last week. "It's enormously expensive to provide housing for every student, and there are 250 houses in the (city's) pipeline that will be sending kids our way very soon."

So far she's dedicated much of her time educating people through social media about how lowering school mitigation fees hurts Monroe students.

The school district not only badly needs every impact dollar they can get, Truitt Pierce said, but they are behind in funding their own building construction.

City economic development manager Jeff Sax is a vocal supporter of increasing the mitigation fee discount.

"The building community is suggesting to us that building is too expensive in Monroe," Sax said. "We hear from developers consistently that \$26,000 is too much money to pull building permits after water, sewer, transportation, parks and schools."

So far the district is up to \$117 million in deferred maintenance and is housing 900 kids in portable classrooms.

The district purchased the classrooms for temporary purposes to fill the gap and is currently using 36 throughout the district, Truitt Pierce said.

Capital bonds also pay for larger schools. The public voted down a \$76 million capital projects bond in 2010 that included expanding Hidden River Middle School and classroom expansions at Chain Lake and Salem Woods elementary schools.

"Every dollar you discount is a direct cost to our taxpayer because it's not optional to provide a facility for kids when they show up at school," Truitt Pierce said.

Despite the district's plea not to decrease funding, several planning commissioners don't see eye to eye with the school district. They feel that giving builders 25 percent discount is not enough to encourage new development in Monroe.

Planning commissioner Bridgette Tuttle said that she believes that Monroe's discount should align with its neighboring cities. "There's an issue with having different fees for different people that are using the same school," Tuttle said. "The consistency is more important than the fairness."

Planning commissioner Steve Jensen disagreed.

"I don't think we should be so quick to just do what everyone else is doing if this has been working for us at 25 percent for however many years," Jensen said. "I don't think we should be scared to have a lower discount rate in the city just because it means it costs more in the city. People are used to that; in fact we seem to be growing at a faster rate than other cities."

Monroe has been discussing these impact fees since the late 1990s, city planner Paul Popelka said last week.