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New development, new services

Xchange gives \$1M to expand firehouse; mayor mulls new school

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The town plans to break ground this year on an expansion for the Washington Hook and Ladder Company on County Avenue. Much of the cost of this expansion – \$1.1 million – has been donated to the town by the developers of the Xchange at

Secaucus Junction housing complex in the south end of town.

Secaucus expects to pay about \$200,000 from the town's capital budget to complete the firehouse expansion, according to Mayor Michael Gonnelli.

This isn't the first donation Xchange has made to the Fire Department.

The vast Xchange complex, which is being built in phases by Fraternity Meadows, has already added hundreds of housing units and new residents to Secaucus. Some members of the Town Council, including the mayor, have said for years that the development will strain such municipal services as police, fire, and local schools. They have further argued that the added burden to town services should be offset by an “impact fee” from Fraternity Meadows to Secaucus. The \$1.1 million donation for the firehouse is the developer’s attempt to mitigate the impact on town services.

The expanded firehouse will include a training headquarters, office space for the three department chiefs, and two new bays that will accommodate fire vehicles. The station will also likely include a permanent designated monument to honor past and present members of the Secaucus Volunteer Fire Department, Gonnelli said.

The town has planned for this expansion for at least the past year. Last year the town purchased a residential home that was next door to Washington Hook and Ladder in anticipation of the firehouse expansion. That house was demolished, also last year.

Town officials could not estimate the amount of new square footage that will be added to Washington Hook and Ladder, and the mayor stated that specific design

details for the firehouse wouldn't be hammered out until after an architect has been hired for the project. However, the Town Council expects to award a professional service contract to an architect within the next few months and groundbreaking for the expansion could take place this fall. The renovated Washington Hook and Ladder should be completed sometime in 2012, according to the mayor.

Impact fee revisited

The \$1.1 million firehouse donation represents a coup for the mayor, who is a member and former chief of the Secaucus Volunteer Fire Department. He has long harped about the way his predecessor spent the "impact fee" from Fraternity Meadows because it was spent on the controversial Recreation Center.

When the Xchange development was first planned, Fraternity Meadows agreed to pay a total \$5 million "impact fee" to the town. Such fees are typically used to offset such municipal services as police, fire, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and public schools. However, the administration of former Mayor Dennis Elwell used it to offset the \$12 million construction costs associated with the Secaucus Recreation Center on Koelle Blvd., which opened in 2008.

Gonnelli has long argued that the Recreation Center does not constitute an impact and so therefore should not have been built with impact fee money.

"I've said all along an impact fee should be used for just that: it should be used to offset the financial impact the town is going to have as a result of this new development," said Gonnelli. "Those impacts are things like roads, police, fire, EMS, and children."

Over the last year Gonnelli said his administration has met with the developers and has "made an issue" over the number of school children being generated by Xchange. He has mentioned that the development impact fee hasn't been used to offset their public education costs.

"Eventually, they came back and they offered this [the \$1.1 million for the firehouse]," the mayor said.

The developer's \$1.1 million donation for the firehouse is a completely separate donation from the \$5 million that was previously earmarked for the construction of the Recreation Center.

This isn't the first donation Xchange has made to the Fire Department. Last May Fraternity Meadows gave the town \$29,000 to underwrite the purchase of a new "sqid" fire truck that can navigate smaller streets than other trucks in the department's fleet.

Why not a school?

Of course, the biggest "impact" that a community sustains as a result of any development isn't fires, but school children.

The mayor and other members of the council have long expressed concerns about the numbers of school children, both current and future, coming out of the town's three biggest developments: Harmon Cove, Xchange at Secaucus Junction, and Riverside Court.

According to a Secaucus Board of Education document obtained by the *Reporter* in November 2010, the town is already bussing 72 students from the Xchange development to Secaucus' four public schools, in addition to one pre-kindergarten student who is not bussed.

At present, there are a total of 921 residents living in Xchange's 482 completed apartment units, according to Town Administrator David Drumeler. Once Xchange is fully developed, the complex is expected to have as many as 3,889 residents, total. This total includes children, "active" adults, and retirees who are expected to move to Xchange.

"We're going to get a lot of school kids as a result of this development," Mayor Gonnelli said of Xchange in November.

Given this concern, why not use the money from the developer to build a new elementary or middle school in town to alleviate overcrowding in Huber, Clarendon, and Secaucus Middle School?

"First of all, \$1.1 million wouldn't buy you that much of a school," Gonnelli responded last week. "But I am now trying to find money to build a new middle school. That is something we're working on."

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