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Panel to start mulling fees

Some caution more research is needed before decision

By Naomi Smoot / Journal Staff Writer

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CHARLES TOWN - Jefferson County commissioners unanimously agreed Thursday to begin examining new impact fees for water, wastewater and stormwater projects, though some cautioned that significant research is still needed.

Joe Hankins, chairman of the Jefferson County Public Service District, asked commissioners to discuss whether impact fees for such infrastructure-related projects were a possibility.

If approved, the fees would finance capital improvements, including a wastewater treatment facility that will have the capacity to process 1 million gallons per day.

In the past, such projects were funded through bonds and cooperative efforts with developers. Implementing an impact fee to cover this would represent a change, Hankins said, adding that such fees would not be a fix for all of the district's needs. But they would provide an additional tool.

"It is not an all-purpose tool, but it is one possible tool," Hankins said of the fees.

The district had attempted to take a more traditional route in funding the new wastewater facility, and requested permission from the West Virginia Public Service Commission nearly 30 months ago to implement a new capacity improvement fee.

Delays in the fee's approval are estimated to have cost the district \$2.5 million in lost revenues, Hankins said, adding that such money is needed to help keep up with the county's growth and the demand for increased infrastructure.

"It's no secret in this county that we have substantial infrastructure needs," he said.

But the idea of adding impact fees for the construction of water and wastewater projects was one that Commissioner Dale Manuel said needed to be considered carefully. Manuel was one of the initial writers of the state's Local Powers Act nearly 18 years ago. He questioned whether impact fees could be implemented for projects such as these.

Manuel urged Hankins to conduct adequate research before reaching a decision. Implementing fees that might not be permissible could be "traumatic to the educational system, law enforcement," and other areas that already rely on impact fees for funding, he said.

Commissioner Rusty Morgan agreed.

Implementation could mark the first time the county would need to be split into districts to ensure that those paying the fees are the same residents who are receiving the services.

Others saw the fees, which are applied only to new construction, as a part of doing business in a growing community.

"It's the cost of growth in the county," said Commissioner Greg Corliss. "I support an interface."

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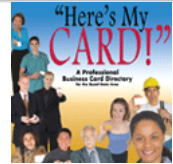
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