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By Michael Van Sickler, Times Staff Writer

After the years-old tax flub surfaces, a St. Petersburg council member calls for a review.

ST. PETERSBURG - With new details emerging about how developers of the Hilton at Carillon Park were wrongly given a \$160,000 tax break, council members are becoming increasingly uneasy with the city's handling of the case.

"At some point, somebody should be held accountable," said Wengay Newton. "I'm talking about someone losing their job or going to jail. I know people who lost their job over a lot less. Something has to be done."

Steve Kornell will ask the council Thursday to order an independent audit of the collection of taxes and impact fees in the past seven years.

"The appropriate course is to make absolutely clear that this was an isolated incident and there aren't further issues," Kornell said. "It's important to the public that we have a discussion on this matter that's open and transparent."

City administrators haven't been forthcoming about the Hilton case, Kornell said.

In 2004, city plans examiner Don Tyre correctly charged the hotel developers \$313,702 for traffic impact fees. He later scratched that out and substituted \$93,751, which the developers paid. County auditors discovered the error in 2007, more than a year after the Hilton opened. When confronted, Tyre told investigators a supervisor ordered him to change the total but couldn't recall who or when.

Tyre still works for the city, and was not disciplined for the error.

The city looked into the mistake, but a *Tampa Bay Times* review of the investigation found it to be incomplete. Tyre named five people who could have told him to make the change, but at least two weren't interviewed. Internal auditor Brad Scott also didn't take notes of the interviews that were done.

Also, when city attorneys first explained the case to the City Council in 2008, they characterized Scott's investigation as more complete than it was.

In November, Newton and Kornell voted against a \$60,000 settlement with the Hilton developers. Council members Leslie Curran, Jeff Danner, Bill Dudley, Jim Kennedy and Karl Nurse voted to approve it.

Nurse and Danner now say they wish they had known more before the vote.

"I was disappointed that the information that came out in the paper afterward was more detailed than what we had at the time," Danner said.

It's unclear, however, if Kornell will persuade a majority of his colleagues to order an audit, which would cost at least \$40,000.

Nurse said he'll read the internal reviews that Scott did to learn more, but thinks Kornell's request sounds reasonable.

"I wish the city had pursued this more aggressively," he said. "I'd be happy to turn over all the rocks."

Curran said she's open to a broad review of impact fee collections, but doesn't want the inquiry to dwell on the Hilton case because it likely won't be solved. "It's very difficult when you have a number of people who don't remember anything."

Kornell said he just wants to make sure the city isn't owed other large sums of money.

"We're going through the trouble of putting boots on cars to get our residents to pay uncollected parking fines; it certainly makes sense to see if anyone else is out there that owes us \$200,000," he said.

But at least so far, Dudley and Kennedy say no further investigation is necessary.

"I feel pretty satisfied that it was just a big screw up," said Dudley.

Kennedy said he had private conversations with Mayor Bill Foster and Rick Mussett, the senior administrator of city development, and was assured that "anything that happened that shouldn't have happened isn't connected with current employees with the city." Kennedy declined to elaborate.

"I don't feel comfortable going into those discussions," Kennedy said. "Those are private discussions between me and them. ... If you want to know, ask them."

Mussett said: "I don't remember talking to him, but I could have."

He added that if he had told Kennedy anything, it wouldn't have been much. He said he doesn't know who ordered Tyre to make the change.

Foster said he didn't tell Kennedy anything not already disclosed publicly.

The Hilton error happened when Rick Baker was mayor. Foster said he doesn't want to second-guess his predecessor.

"I'm going to reserve my comments to hear what council is feeling and looking for," Foster said. "If only one council member wants a management study, then I'm not going to worry about it. I have a lot of faith in my auditing staff. If council doesn't believe that and needs reassurance, then I'll support that."

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