



City park fund could get boost

By Beth Wilson
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CORPUS CHRISTI — The playground at McDonald's has more amenities than the one in Esperanza Davila's neighborhood park.

When she and her niece Brianna Brown walk to South Bluff Park to play, she holds the 2-year-old in the big-kid swings carefully because the small playground doesn't have toddler-sized equipment.

What she'd like for Brianna: baby-sized swings, a spring-rider horse and maybe another slide.

The city's fund for parks could get a significant boost if a park development fee for new subdivisions is approved.

A committee of developers and neighborhood association members worked with the city's planning department on the recommended revisions, part of the unified development code the City Council is set to adopt in sections during the next few months. The parks section is set for the first of two readings Tuesday.

That group proposed a \$50 per-housing-unit park development fee. During a presentation before the council last month, council members said they'd like to increase it to \$200 to build the fund faster.

If any fee is approved, the city will have a new source of money to improve existing parks and make new parks. Residential developers, however, fear the fees will increase their costs.

"Successful parks departments are so because there are specific funds for parks," said Daiquiri Richard, executive director of Beautify Corpus Christi Association and chairwoman of the committee reviewing the code.

The new park development fund is projected to bring in about \$105,000 a year if it's a \$50 fee or about \$420,850 at the \$200 fee, given the average number of permits for new development from the past four years.

New subdivisions have to dedicate 5 percent of land as a park or pay the city the equivalent of what that land would cost.

The city's park needs are extensive. In addition to maintaining and improving the city's existing 1,936 acres of parks, new parks are needed, too, officials said. A long-range plan calls for more, larger parks, and hike-and-bike trails linking existing parks.

Billy Delgado, parks and special projects superintendent, said the creation of a 40-acre park near the Gabe Lozano Sr. Golf Center is estimated at \$7 million for soccer and baseball fields, covered basketball courts, playgrounds, picnic pavilions and a skateboarding facility. Such a large project likely would be done in phases and could include some bond funds, he said.

If this new fee is approved, the money collected from new subdivisions would go to parks used by families in that subdivision, said Bob Payne, a city planner working through the code revisions with the volunteer committee.

A parks master plan shows which parks serve which neighborhoods, and money would be distributed according to that, he said. This would focus the funds in the same area, and, for example, prevent fees from a new Calallen subdivision going to improve a park on the Southside.

Money from this fund could cover needed upgrades for safety and accessibility issues, add such amenities as water fountains, restrooms, landscaping and shaded areas and help pay for new, larger regional parks.

"It's a quality-of-life issue," Richard said. "If we have lots of nice parks, it says a lot of our community."

Not everyone is pleased with the new fee.

Freddie Seaquist, president of Freedom Homes and one of several homebuilders on the committee, said the revisions would be about a 60 percent increase from what developers pay under the existing park code.

Seaquist said he'll explain that to the council Tuesday and hopes the fee is brought back to the \$50 per unit

recommended by the committee.

"They are wanting more and more and more," he said.

Richard said developers likely will protest the new fee, especially as it is part of the whole code review process, which likely will result in an increase in the overall cost of business for developers.

But, she said, it's a pass-through cost for them.

"If you're developing in this community, parks are a plus for you," she said.

Richard said this new fee is offset a bit by a proposed change in another fee dedicated to parks.

That fee calls for a dedication of one acre of park land per 200 multi-family units or 100 single family homes, instead of the current 5 percent dedication.

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