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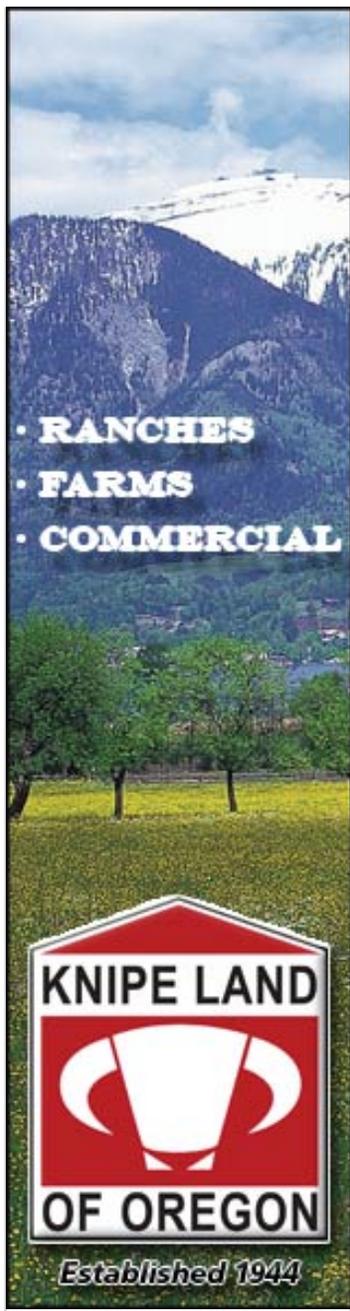
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Council hires firm to write SDC ordinance

February 12, 2008 11:00 pm



Eric Scott climbs from roof work in this December photograph of housing construction in Baker City. The City Council is considering charging a new fee for the construction of homes and businesses. (Baker City Herald/S. John Collins).

By JAYSON JACOBY

Baker City Herald

The Baker City Council could be ready, by the end of the year, to assess a system development charge on people who build a new home or business.

But councilors have not decided when the city will start sending SDC bills.

Nor have councilors discussed how much those bills should be.

What the City Council did Tuesday evening was vote 5-2 to hire BST Associates of Sutherlin.

Under terms of the 240-day contract, the city will pay BST Associates \$34,960 to write an ordinance that would authorize the city to charge SDCs for each of the five types of projects Oregon law allows: water, sewer, storm water, transportation and parks.

More than half of Oregon's 240 incorporated cities require SDCs for at least one of those categories. Baker City never has required SDCs.

Fees for single-family homes range from several hundred dollars to more than \$10,000.

SDCs came about because as cities grow, they need to undertake expensive projects such as building larger water reservoirs, sewage treatment plants and parks.

The purpose of SDCs is to ensure that people who build new homes or businesses pay part of the cost for those expansions.

Baker City councilors emphasized, however, that even if they approve an SDC ordinance, the city would not have to immediately impose any new fees.

City Manager Steve Brocato told councilors Tuesday that his overriding goal is to ensure SDCs do not discourage people from building homes and businesses.

Brocato said that if he thinks new fees would stifle development, he will recommend councilors wait to assess SDCs.

Councilor Terry Schumacher, who voted yes on the motion to hire BST Associates, shares Brocato's concerns about the effect SDCs could have on builders and developers.

However, Schumacher said he does not think councilors should delay SDCs until the city has grown so much that it must spend millions of dollars to expand its water and sewer systems or other infrastructure.

"Growth, if it happens, I think it would be good to be prepared for it rather than trying to catch up," Schumacher said. "We need to stay ahead of the curve."

Councilor Dennis Dorrah, who along with Mayor Jeff Petry voted against hiring BST Associates, said he thinks the city is far enough ahead of that curve that SDCs are not necessary.

"I would feel totally different if I was seeing growth," Dorrah said. "But we do not have, I feel, a huge growth problem, so I just don't right now see an urgency to do this."

Dorrah said he worries that SDCs could hinder development.

Councilor Beverly Calder, who voted yes on the motion to hire BST Associates, said that in none of the studies she has read about SDCs in Oregon is there evidence that the fees inhibited growth.

Calder contends that SDCs benefit current city residents, some of whom have paid water and sewer bills for decades.

If the city doesn't charge SDCs, then those residents would pay a larger share of projects that growth might necessitate, Calder said.

Councilor Andrew Bryan, who also voted yes on the BST motion, agreed.

Bryan said current residents inevitably will subsidize growth, through their water and sewer bills and other city fees.

With SDCs, that subsidy is smaller, Bryan said.

Calder said she thinks the City Council should at least have an SDC ordinance ready, even if the city doesn't yet need to impose SDCs.

"We've done our homework," Calder said. "I think it's a smart thing to do."

Petry said he voted no on the motion not because he's absolutely opposed to SDCs, but because he thinks Oregon's property tax system punishes people who build new homes or businesses.

Due to property tax limits that the state's voters have approved during the past 18 years, people who have owned their homes for many years usually have smaller tax bills than people who build new homes, Petry said — even if the homes have similar market values.

He argues that people who build new homes already pay "more than their fair share" in property taxes, and that it would be unfair to saddle homeowners with an SDC.

Petry also pointed out that homeowners pay property taxes every year, whereas SDCs are a one-time fee.

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