

EXPLORER

News

Council candidates debate impact fees

Some consider deferring payment an option in recession

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Published:

February-25-2009

As Marana Town Council candidates faced off at the last of several public candidate forums last Thursday, Feb. 19, they found themselves addressing impact fees — more specifically, whether the town should collect them.

The fees can stir controversy, though they are widely used to offset costs that growth can bring to communities.

Impact fees, which developers pay, provide funds to build adequate infrastructure for growing communities. Critics say such fees can reduce economic growth if developers decide to take their business elsewhere.

This month, the Tucson City Council debated the idea of suspending impact fees to spur the local economy, hopefully inspiring local builders to start new projects in the city.

At the Marana candidate forum, held during a chamber of commerce luncheon at Oasis at Wild Horse Ranch, the sentiment was clear: The town needs its fees.

But in light of the recession, council candidates proposed changes to the town's current system.

Jon Post, who was appointed to the council last February when Tim Escobedo stepped down, spoke in favor of the fees, saying they guarantee that newcomers, rather than longtime residents, pay for growth.

However, Post added, the town needs to grow, and the fees shouldn't be so high as to discourage building.

"I think right now we need to relax them a bit," he said.

The town relies on sales tax receipts and impact fees to cover most of its \$34-million fiscal 2009 general operating expenses.

In fiscal 2008, the town charged impact fees of nearly \$4,000 per new home for parks and roadway improvements. Other fees, such as those charged for permits, can add as much as \$14,000 to the cost of each home, according to a 2008 Southern Arizona Home Builders Association study.

Candidate Bret Summers agreed with Post that now might be the time to lower impact fees. Calling them "a necessary evil," Summers said Marana must keep business growth in mind when establishing fee amounts.

"Marana needs to be the most competitive in the region," he said. "We should be beating everyone else's impact fees."

Challenger Larry Steckler, who left Las Vegas when he says it became too expensive to live there, said the fees must remain in place, though they must also be kept in check.

"Giving away the impact fees only makes living here more expensive for the rest of us," he said.

Patti Comerford, who has served on the council for eight years, said developers need to pay for the growth they create.

"Because Marana doesn't have a property tax, we need to find a way to make those improvements," Comerford said.

Carol McGorray, a councilwoman of eight years, agreed.

"Impact fees provide for the success of the town," McGorray said.

But she pointed out an impact fee option that no one at the forum had mentioned.

"One thing now is to defer them, not to do away with them," she suggested.

Herb Kai, a councilman of 16 years, picked up on the deferment concept — the idea of letting developers wait to pay impact fees until they're in a better position to pay them, such as after houses have sold.

"If you can defer that to a later date, I do think it will stimulate growth," he said.

Challenger Kelle Maslyn also supported deferring impact fee collection.

"Growth needs to pay for itself," she said.

Also at the forum, the candidates were asked if they consider themselves politically conservative, moderate or liberal.

Incumbents Comerford, McGorray and Kai said they keep their personal politics out of the equation when making decisions for Marana. But Comerford said she's Republican, McGorray a moderate, and Kai a Democrat.

Summers and Steckler, who both claimed conservative views, said government needs to stay out of folks' and businesses' ways.

Steckler, however, allowed that the government has a role to play in the local economy.

Maslyn said she's a moderate liberal personally, but is conservative when it comes to business. Post said he's registered as a Republican and "very conservative," but insisted he doesn't vote along party lines.

The council primary election is March 10. Many town residents already have received their ballots by mail.

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