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By Tara DeRock Mahoney
 Senior Staff Writer

Madison City Council members held the first of two public hearings on whether or not to enact impact fees in the city.

Impact fees are heavily regulated costs associated with new development that are collected by local government and set aside for specific public projects brought about because of growth in a community.

“We’d like to have a mechanism for shifting some of the expense of new growth from our current homeowners to developers,” said Mayor Tom DuPree. The city has not yet decided whether or not it will pass an impact fee ordinance, but it has been working with local citizens and consultant Bill Ross for over a year, gathering information on what sort of projects might be funded locally by impact fees and how much might be charged to various types of projects.

The city will hold the second of two public hearings at its first regular meeting in April, although no decision will be made that night because at least one council member will be out of town for that meeting. The enactment of the ordinance will be put on the agenda of the second city council meeting in April for the council’s consideration.

Monday night, no one from the public was on hand to speak in favor of impact fees; two city residents were present who were against the ordinance in its current draft form.

“I would strongly urge you to postpone adoption of this ordinance,” said David Land, who prepared comments to read to the council outlining his concerns with the proposed ordinance and who has been involved in the citizens’ committee that has reviewed the possibility of the program on the local level

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“After a year and a half, while I am not opposed to the adoption of impact fees per se, I am strongly opposed to some of the key language in the draft ordinance that you are now considering,” said Land. Specifically, said Land, he was concerned about the proposed methodology of calculating impact fees—some of which seemed disproportionately high and which Land feared would drive away development—as well as the idea of enacting any type of impact fee in the current economy, which he characterized as “in flames.” Impact fee consultant Bill “the younger” Ross, tried to allay some of Land’s concerns by pointing out that a new methodology with very different development costs was in the hands of the council, a version which Land did not have because it had been developed after the citizens’ committee had met for the last time, said City Planning and Zoning Director Monica Callahan. And Council Member Michael Naples did not necessarily agree with Land’s contention that enacting the new ordinance during a recession would drive away future development.

“I often think that the purpose of [impact fees] is to allow new development to carry its fair share [of infrastructure costs],” said Naples. “It’s still basically unfair to current residents that they should have to pay increased taxes to fund new growth, no matter how slowly [that growth arrives].”

There is only one development project underway in Madison that has not yet received a building permit and which could thus be affected by the new ordinance, if enacted; that is the construction of a new Holiday Inn hotel behind the McDonald’s near Interstate 20. City planners said that they had already made contact with the project organizers and the owners of the new hotel are aware of the possibility of an increase to their development costs by way of impact fees.

In other council business, the group heard from City Attorney Joe Reitman on another round of updates and edits to the city’s alcohol sales and pouring licenses. The council also appointed Julie Speyer, owner of the Pure Bliss Spa and Shop, and Vicky Hunt, owner of Barkin’ Dogs Shoes, to the Main Street Advisory Board.

City Manager David Nunn reported that the city is still weighing the pros and cons of potentially extending the city’s natural gas service into the southeastern portions of the county.

“We’re taking the time, doing the correct amount of study...we’re not yet firm on a recommendation,” said Nunn. However, if the city does decided to extend the city’s mains to the lake area, the decision and the project will likely come soon, as building projects remain in a slump.

“Contractors are hungry, and they’re getting hungrier,” said Nunn.

The city also met in a work session immediately prior to Monday night’s council meeting, primarily to talk about the new Town Park and what types of events might be held there in the future. The council is considering, in particular, whether to allow alcohol in the park for specific events. No decisions were reached during the work session, in which Main Street director Ann Huff said she was mainly asking council members to consider the matter in order to make a decision within a month or two.

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