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February 15, 2007 - 5:18AM

Mesa's proposed impact fee hikes are reasonable in comparison with its neighbors

Tribune Editorial

When someone purchases a new home, it's not just an investment in the future and a continuation of the American Dream; it's a new sewer hookup, it's another set of tires wearing down the roads, it's a new stop on the garbage truck's route, and more people checking books and DVDs out of the library.

In Mesa's case, library patrons are competing for an ever-shrinking inventory of new releases, or else be content with a 1979 Sidney Sheldon novel or a videotape, on the off chance they still own a functioning VCR.

The East Valley's largest city is now as famous for its budget crisis as for having wide streets and wide people (according to one very unscientific survey), so the City Council is considering taking the reasonable step of raising the impact fees it charges for every new home and business built within its borders.

Impact fees to cover the cost of providing services to new residents and businesses has become common practice in Arizona, But there's a line we must be careful around, between developing an area responsibly and using government-imposed fees to choke off a city and its residents from the benefits of economic growth.

The 43 percent to 73 percent increases under consideration in Mesa may sound as if the city is zooming from one extreme to the other. But today, its impact fees stand at \$5,233 per single-family home and \$1,130 per 1,000 square feet of nonresidential use. It is the fourth-cheapest Valley city to build a home in, and the third-cheapest in which to build an office, retail or industrial business.

This wouldn't in itself justify raising fees if Mesa were drawing from the same financial base as surrounding municipalities, but as the only city besides Apache Junction and Queen Creek that doesn't currently charge a property tax, it's not.

Queen Creek, where residents will vote this May on whether to adopt a property tax to pay for a fire department and other services, charges \$13,805 per new detached, single-family dwelling. Gilbert's and Chandler's residential impact fees are within \$100 of Queen Creek's figure.

Mesa's proposed single-home impact in the range of \$8,300 to \$8,500 (depending on whether it continues charging a cultural impact fee) would put it slightly below the Valley average, reasonable for a city that has more infrastructure in place than its newer neighbors to the south, but still has some wide-open spaces to develop. The proposed residential impact fee of \$1,950 per 1,000 square feet is less than half the Valley's average, one tool the city can use to increase its job base.

The higher impact fees also help ensure the developers who build in Mesa are the ones who are willing to invest in the city's future.

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