



Nancy Hicks: Impact fee freeze losing council supporters

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Had impact fees followed the consumer price index, they would be about 11 percent higher than they were five years ago.

So fees for an average new home, \$4,685, would be about \$5,188 next year, if the City Council had not frozen them for the past five years.

But council support for the annual freeze is waning.

Last year, Councilman Jonathan Cook promised his yes vote on a freeze would be his last.

On Monday, he voted no.

New Councilwoman DiAnna Schimek said her approval this year would be her first -- and last.

"I will vote yes today. But I won't be doing it again," she said.

Originally, the fees were set so they would cover about half the cost of new streets and water and sewer systems for new homes or businesses.

Business groups generally oppose the impact fee, contending it stifles new development.

Neighborhood associations generally support even higher impact fees, contending new homes and businesses should pay their own way.

"It's not fair for current homeowners to subsidize new homeowners," said Lois Haupt, with the Lincoln Neighborhood Alliance.

Two for Trees

Lincoln's skyline, once rich with trees, is becoming a little more barren each year.

For every five public trees the city removes, just one new one is planted.

August was a particularly bad month. The city lost 735 public trees when three windstorms ripped through the central part of town.

Parks and Recreation Director Lynn Johnson notices the difference -- like a missing tooth here and there -- as he drives arterial streets.

To help keep Lincoln's green canopy, the city plans to create a voluntary donation program through the city water and wastewater bill.

Customers will be able to donate \$1 a month to the city's tree program. Because the bills are paid every two months, that's \$2 per billing cycle.

The city plans to start the "Two for Trees" program around Arbor Day in April and hopes to raise \$40,000 in donations, which would require 6 percent of customers to participate. The amount would be matched by the Lincoln Community Foundation.

That would pay for more than 400 trees a year.

Initially the trees would be planted on arterial streets and in parks, Johnson said.

Bonds for Wesleyan

In May 2010, Nebraska voters approved a constitutional amendment that allows nonprofits to use the bonding authority of local cities and counties.

Nebraska Wesleyan University will be the first to use Lincoln's bonding authority under that change. The university will be looking at a \$20 million-plus bond to pay off \$17.5 million in current bonds at a higher interest rate and to renovate Johnson Hall.

The \$2.5 million renovation includes an elevator, air conditioning, new wiring and plumbing in the dorm built in 1947.

The city will not be liable for the Wesleyan bonds. And the only cost to the city is staff time attending a few meetings.

The bonds likely will appear as a footnote in city audits.

Using the city's authority will save Wesleyan some fees it pays to the Nebraska Educational Finance Authority when using that group's bonding authority.

The bonds likely will breeze through the official City Council approval process in December. No council members raised objections during a briefing this week.