



Kalispell City Council

Public Hearing on Traffic Impact Fees Tonight

By Dan Testa, 3-02-09

Kalispell City Council will hold a public hearing at its 7 p.m. meeting tonight to collect feedback on the implementation of the controversial transportation impact fees, which are scheduled for a March 9 vote.

A transportation impact fee would charge developers additional costs for the road improvements made necessary by the increased traffic generated by those new homes, stores and businesses. For two years Kalispell has been trying to come up with a workable policy while developers have criticized the fees as unfair to commercial development, particularly retail, some of which might be required to pay millions, and possibly out of line with state law. The deteriorating economy and attendant slowdown in new construction has only heightened the urgency of this issue for both the city and the business community.

The council wants to hear public opinion on three alternatives for implementing the fees that might lessen the impacts on developers who already have projects in place, and now find themselves buffeted by a lackluster economy on top of a new, and potentially substantial cost, in the form of the traffic impact fees. The first alternative would be to simply adopt the fees as they exist in the traffic engineer's report – a scenario unlikely to garner majority support on the council, due mainly to the harmful effect on existing projects that Kalispell's biggest developers claim.

The second alternative would exempt from the fees any development with a preliminary plat approved between July 1, 2004 and July 1 2009 for six years following the approval of the plat. This idea, introduced by Councilman Bob Hafferman, would exempt nearly every major commercial and residential development on Kalispell's northern end. This would exempt the main shopping center of the Glacier Town Center by Wolford Development, Spring Prairie shopping center and Hutton Ranch Plaza, as well as more than 1,500 homes in various northern developments.

The third alternative would implement the impact fees at a rate of 75 percent of the scheduled

charge for any new construction that applies for a building permit within two years of the city's adoption of the traffic impact fees, April 1, 2011.

The city council must also decide, prior to adopting the traffic impact fees, how much to reduce the list of Capital Improvement projects that the fees would pay for. Reducing the list of projects would reduce the fees developers must pay, and since the city lacks the funds to pay its share of many of these projects, like a Grandview Drive extension that would require construction of a bridge. One plan would cut the \$12-million list of projects in half; another plan would cut it even further.

Over the last two years, the biggest opposition to the traffic impact fees has come from Kalispell's three biggest commercial developers, whose projects stand to be charged the most due to the traffic they will generate: Phil Harris's Hutton Ranch Plaza, Mark Goldberg's Spring Prairie and the yet-to-be-constructed Glacier Town Center by Woldford Development. In a Feb. 25 letter, Goldberg argued that adoption of the traffic impact fees should be tabled until the economy, and Kalispell, begin growing again. A letter from Harris to council, dated Feb. 25, argued that his entire development should be exempt from impact fees because they have all come down since he began his development, but if the council does move forward with the fees, that he supports grandfathering those with preliminary plats. **[End of article]**

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