

The Morning News

Local News for Northwest Arkansas

Road Impact Fees Undecided

By Dug Begley
The Morning News

FAYETTEVILLE -- Whether or not Fayetteville begins assessing road impact fees could hinge on 23 overseas absentee votes.

Washington County Election Commission Chairman John Logan Burrow announced just before 9 p.m. that Tuesday night's unofficial election results had the proposal to institute road impact fees in Fayetteville ahead by one vote, 2,015 to 2,014.

"There are 23 overseas absentee ballots still out," Burrow said shortly after reading the results. He added 17 ballots were registered with no votes cast.

The election will not be certified until April 20, and the overseas ballots have until then to arrive, Burrow said. Election officials in the meantime will do an in-house audit of the election and recount the ballots, as is customary, Burrow said.

The razor-thin margin left supporters of the proposed road impact fees pleased, but anxiously awaiting the final result.

"We'll just have to see what happens," said City Council member Lioneld Jordan, a leading proponent of the fees. "But I'll say I've never seen it this close before."

Pam Jones, chairwoman of Citizens4Fayetteville, the group spearheading the opposition to the impact fees, was unavailable.

The road impact fees would be assessed on new development throughout the city, based on the type of building constructed. Residential homes of any size will pay a flat fee, and commercial development will be charged based on every 1,000 square feet of space.

A city estimate found the road impact fee would raise \$3.4 million for street improvements annually. The proposal also forced the city to spend the money solely on road projects, and refund it to the person who paid the fee if the money was not used in seven years.

Supporters said the fees are needed to recoup the extra costs associated with Fayetteville's growth. Proponents said the fees would be fair because those causing the growth, new development, would pay them.

Critics said the fees would stymie new investment in the city, and in the long run would hurt sales tax revenue. Any decline in sales tax revenue would force the city to increase taxes, thus charging everyone anyway, opponents said.

Citizens4Fayetteville raised more than \$40,000 to oppose the proposed fees, and used campaign signs and television commercials to encourage no votes.

Supporters of the fees, including a fledgling group, VoteForFayetteville, raised less than \$1,000 and concentrated on door-to-door campaigning and word of mouth.

"We got outspent, but I think we got the message out," Jordan said after the results were announced.

This is not the only recent Fayetteville election to go down to the wire. Richard Osborne was declared the unofficial winner over Adella Gray for the Ward 1, Position 1 City Council seat by two votes. The next day, an internal audit of the results reversed the election, and Gray was eventually certified the winner by four votes.

INFOBOX ONE

By the Numbers

Should Fayetteville assess a road impact fee on development?

* Yes: 2,015

* No: 2,014

Results unofficial

Source: Washington County Election Board