Civic group eyes tax for patrols

By DEANN SMITH
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The Southside Civic Association is exploring creating a district that would tax property owners to pay for off-duty police patrols and speed humps, but the proposal is drawing a mixed reaction.

Some homeowners Tuesday said they would welcome the tax, a flat fee that would be less than $100 annually. They said the tax would be less than the $120 they pay each year through the civic association for extra patrols by off-duty police officers.

Mim Aretsky, 4233 Orchid St., said it's not fair that she pays for extra police patrols, but people who don't pay still benefit from them. She said a tax district would solve that problem.

"I think it's a really good idea. I think it's really necessary," she said, adding the revenue should also pay for beautification projects and speed humps, which are designed to slow motorists.

Other homeowners said there should be no mandatory tax and vowed to vote against it.

Business owners on the south side of Perkins Road also were divided. Several business owners said they are already taxed enough and would oppose the tax, while others said they would willingly pay for extra patrols.

Meg Read, owner of All Occasions, 3064 Perkins Road, said she opposes the proposal. She said extra patrols won't stop all crime.

"I think people are taxed too much as it is," Read said. "If they want police patrols, for the neighborhood, then pay for it out of the civic association's dues. I don't think it ought to be mandatory for the homeowners."

John Hill, president of the Southside Civic Association, said the tax district would levy a flat rate per parcel of property. It would not be a traditional property tax based on the worth of the property, he said.

"It's a fee. It's not based on assessment," he said. "Everybody pays the same."

The proposal is still a long way from fruition, Hill said.

"There are many, many steps along the way," he said. "We are in the very early exploratory stages."

Making the fee mandatory would generate more revenue, Hill said. The tax would let the association pay for more patrols, he said.

He said the association has about 750 members, but not all pay for the police patrols. He said the association raises...
about $50,000 annually for police patrols.

“We have sporadic coverage,” Hill said.

Baton Rouge Police Department records on crime in the Southside area weren’t immediately available Tuesday.

The area has few violent crimes, Hill said. The area sees primarily property crimes, such as thefts and car burglaries, he said.

“It’s constant little petty thefts all over the place,” he said. “We do have a lot of garage burglaries.”

The boundaries of the civic association might not be the district’s boundaries, Hill said. The civic association is bounded roughly by the south side of Perkins on the north, East and South Lakeshore drives and Hollydale Avenue on the west, Bayou Duplantier on the south and Glasgow Avenue on the east.

The association doesn’t include many businesses on the north side of Perkins Road.

Hill said the association would hold neighborhood meetings later this year to see which subdivisions would be interested in being part of the tax district.

He said a subdivision could opt out.

The Legislature would have to pass a law allowing creation of the tax district, Hill said.

If that is done, it would go to a vote of the property owners in the district for approval. If that passed, a separate election would be held on the amount of the tax, he said.

The Legislature has authorized taxing districts for the Lakeshore and Garden District neighborhoods in New Orleans, Hill said.

The Lakeshore district charges $100 per parcel, and Southside’s fee would probably be lower, he said.

Ross Avenue homeowner Jim Douglas says he would support the Southside Civic Association if it pursues an idea to tax property owners to pay for police patrols and speed humps. Douglas says he already pays for extra police patrols, adding the possible tax would be lower.

Ross Avenue resident Jim Douglas said he would, without question, support creating the district. He said he would welcome additional patrols.

“I would be paying even less than I am paying now. That makes it even better,” he said.

Mary H. Heroman and Lisa Knotts, who both live on Cloverdale Avenue, said they would support the tax district, particularly since it would make police in the area more visible.

“I think it’s going to benefit everybody,” Heroman said.

But Knotts’ husband, Gary Focht, said he is uncomfortable with paying more taxes, but likes the idea of more patrols.

Attorney Derren Johnson, who has an office on the south side of Perkins Road, said there are already enough patrols on Perkins. She said she’s not a member of the civic association, and wouldn’t vote to create a tax district.

Business owner Margaret Pereboom, whose office is also on the south side of Perkins, said she hasn’t had a problem with crime.

But Pereboom, a member of the Southside Civic Association, said she understands why homeowners would want the extra patrols.

“I’ll abide by the majority decision,” she said.

The idea was first broached publicly during a civic association meeting earlier this year.

Hill said 75 to 80 association members attended a meeting in March, and the vast majority supported exploring the idea of a tax district.

“We have got months of work to do,” Hill said.