Youngsville’s growth increasing burden

Officials consider fee on new residences

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YOUNGSVILLE – Officials are debating whether to levy a fee for each new residential permit issued in Youngsville, a city with loads of charm and good public schools but also one without the business-generated tax income needed to maintain infrastructure in the coming years.

Youngsville’s robust population growth — over a thousand permits for new homes issued over the past two years — is putting a strain on the roads, sewer system and other public works responsibilities, Mayor Ken Ritter said.

Ritter is proposing charging residential developers and home builders a $2,250 “impact fee” that ultimately would be paid by home buyers. Ritter said $2,250 is a figure he came up with to get the discussion started. He also said he is not proposing a fee to be levied against new businesses.

If the five-member City Council OKs its passage, Youngsville would be the first government in Lafayette Parish to impose the fee, which is required in other parts of the U.S. and in some Louisiana parishes including St. Tammany and East Baton Rouge.

“The struggle for me is, I do not want to discourage development” of residential tracts, Ritter said last week. “We are open for business. But it’s no secret that we are heavy residential.”

Ritter and the five-member City Council preside over a city with tax revenue that pales in Youngsville compared to the city of Broussard, which has a fee not imposed on those who buy homes earlier.

The high school, which has not been named yet, is to be located at the corner of South Larrievire Road and Almonaster Road, near Chemin Metairie Parkway. The roads at the Larrievire and Almonster intersection have subpar surfaces and are not wide enough, he said. “You can’t pass two school buses on it.”

Ritter said he and many others have lobbied the School Board for years to build a new high school for south Lafayette Parish students, who now attend Comeaux High School.

“Now the School Board’s called our bluff and given us a high school,” he said.

Debate over the impact fee kicked off July 9 at a Youngsville council meeting where local home builders quelled up to oppose the measure.

“We feel like it’s a little unfair to hit the new homeowner with an extra cost,” Mac Gibson said at the meeting. Gibson is president of Acadian Home Builders Association and owns M&K Gibson Construction with his wife, Kay.

Gibson also said the fee could push a new home’s price past the point that some buyers could afford.

Kay Gibson last week disagreed with Ritter’s reasoning that new residents should pay a fee not imposed on those who bought homes earlier.

“It’s infrastructure that everybody uses. We all use the same roads,” she said. “That’s always the same argument. Somebody always wants someone else to pay.”

Gibson also said the fee’s extra cost would place more weight on the shoulders of local home builders, whose costs include sales taxes of 10½ percent for construction materials.

It’s the small-business person bearing the burden, not just in our business but owners of hardware stores, grocery stores, she said. “It’s putting more and more small businesses across the nation out of business.”

According to a study by Austin, Texas, firm Duncan Associates, in 2010, the average impact fee levied in the U.S. was almost $11,800. In Louisiana in 2010, East Baton Rouge Parish levied a fee of $2,841, while St. Tammany charged $3,077. California, according to the study, had the country’s most expensive fees, which averaged about $24,400 per single-family home.

The study said the fees are collected and used on maintenance and to keep up with growth by allocating money in a variety of public works areas: roads, drinking water, sewer systems, storm water, parks, fire and police, libraries, solid waste facilities and schools.

Ken Stansbury, a Youngsville first-year councilman, opposes the impact fee. He said Youngsville could try harder to attract more businesses that would pull in sales taxes.

“It only takes a couple of businesses to get the momentum started,” he said.

Diane McClelland, the only veteran legislator on the Youngsville council, said she favors passing an impact fee, but she believes $2,250 is too steep.

“I was there 20 years ago when you had these independent developers and home builders who took a risk and built these subdivisions in Youngsville,” McClelland said. “We want to be fair and listen to their concerns.”

The Gibsons, other members of the home builders association and Youngsville officials are scheduled to meet Monday for breakfast. Ritter said the fee will be introduced and discussed again at Youngsville’s next City Council meeting Aug. 13, and the council could vote on the fee in September.

The Acadia

Advocate
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page 1B
col. 1-6