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County: Planning fund empty

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A three-year land-use challenge by statewide environmental group Futurewise has "taken long hours out of our long-range planning staff time" and has used up all county budget reserves that pay for that service, Thurston County Commissioner Diane Oberquell said Thursday.

As a result, Oberquell said, the county will have to draw from its already-strained general fund budget to pay for long-range planning. The necessity of the move was made clear Thursday after staff members told the commissioners that without major increases in land-use permit fees, the empty reserve fund that had previously financed long-range planning will not be replenished.

The new fee schedule, now in its third revision after citizen complaints that the proposed increases were unfair, likely will come up for a vote at the April 21 commission public meeting.

"If we're asking people to pay fees for land-use permits, we should just charge Futurewise for all we've done in the last two or three years to respond to their challenge," Oberquell said. "I think 99 percent of these long-range planning costs should be attributable to someone else."

Futurewise officials, whose 2005 challenge to Thurston County's 2004 comprehensive plan update was upheld by the Western Washington Growth Management Board, disagreed.

"If the county had done the right thing in 2004, they wouldn't be in this fix now," said Tim Trohimovich, Futurewise planning director. "Back in 2004, we outlined in great detail the changes the county needed to make to better protect its water quality and quantity, oyster farms, rural character and working farms; they ignored us and those protections."

Former state lawmaker Sandra Romero, a Futurewise board member and Democratic county commission candidate, said the county had no choice but to go through the public process to amend its general plan once the growth board issued its ruling.

"They had to spend the time to do the right thing," Romero said. "It's a public process; that's the law of the land."

Trohimovich and Romero criticized the county for spending money on legal fees to appeal the growth board decision to the state Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court. A state high court ruling in the case is pending after a hearing in March.

According to Michael Welter, county development director, the county spent "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in staff time to revise the comprehensive plan to meet the growth board guidelines. At least a half-dozen county long-range planners quit as a result of the process, and the department is short-staffed, Welter said.

He said the county has budgeted \$819,716 for long-range planning in 2008, but only a small portion of that could be recovered through permit fees, according to the newly revised fee schedule.

"Staff continues to work on defining what portion of long-range planning can be directly attributable to the permit process," he said. Olympia Master Builders have protested the county's original proposal to charge fees for long-range planning, such as rezoning to comply with the growth board's ruling.

The long-range planning and permit fee crunch comes at a time when the county had to borrow from its general reserves to balance its 2008 budget and faces an estimated \$3.8 million budget shortfall for 2009.

A county advisory committee, one of three groups set up in recent months to address the budget crisis, is analyzing first-quarter expenses to see if projections are holding, said Don Krupp, the county's chief administrative officer.

Krupp said it was too soon to tell whether staff or program cuts will be necessary, but he and others have warned that such a move might be needed if other cost-cutting measures are not enough.

Meanwhile, the new permit fee schedule comes after at least 40 people complained at a Feb. 28 public meeting that permit fee increases of double, triple or even quadruple the levels of last year were intolerable. Staff said at the time that they were under a mandate to recover 100 percent of their costs to process permit applications, but commissioners told staff members to revise the rates downward.

At Thursday's briefing, commissioners agreed with the proposal that includes:

- **Minimum base fees** will be charged for many permits, with hourly rates imposed if a permit application takes too long.
- **Staff members will submit** a detailed report anytime they go beyond the base fee to the hourly rate and specify the need for such charges.
- **Staff members will update** the preliminary permit checklists so applicants are better prepared to fit inside the base fee.
- **Staff members will provide** frequent reports to the county commission, possibly on a monthly basis, for at least a year to make sure staff was kept accountable on all charges.

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