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St. Paul: Developers' contributions to parks debated

By Frederick Melo

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| UPDATED: NAN YEARS AGO

When developers build new housing and commercial sites in urban areas, they often are required to make a contribution toward new parklands.

In St. Paul, the formula on how much money or green space they're expected to provide is about to change, and parks enthusiasts and business advocates remain at loggerheads over whether the city's proposed approach goes too far or not far enough.

A crowd of activists appeared before the city council on Wednesday, some pleading for more leniency and others for stricter requirements.

If approved by the council, the upper limit for parkland dedication payments will nearly double for residential developments, going from 2.3 percent to 4.5 percent of a parcel's estimated market value. The upper limit for commercial and industrial projects will decline by a third, going from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent.

"Some will tell you that St. Paul cannot afford a robust parkland dedication ordinance," wrote Shirley Erstad, executive director of the Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County, in a letter to the council. "Quite the opposite is true. ... By having a weak ordinance, the result is lower revenue and therefore subpar amenities compared to our neighboring communities."

Matt Kramer, president of the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, noted that 96 percent of St. Paul residents already live within a 10-minute walk of a park. The proposed "changes may negatively affect the city's ability to grow and expand its tax base," he wrote in a July 14 letter to the council.

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CHANGING PLANS

The city's staff recommendations, which passed the planning commission on April 24, would alter an existing parkland dedication ordinance from 2007. The existing language requires developers to submit parkland, or payments in lieu of parkland, based on the number of parking spaces associated with a project. The logic went that parking stalls are an indication of a building's intensity of use.

But that's not always the case, especially in light of efforts to create more transit-oriented developments along the Green Line and other public transit routes.

In 2013, state lawmakers passed legislation allowing Minneapolis and St. Paul to require parkland contributions at the point that building permits are approved, rather than when subdivisions are platted.

The legislation inspired months of soul searching on behalf of city planners to craft changes competitive with Minneapolis.

"This is the culmination of that work, recognizing that there's a lot of new development happening in the city and the more intense development we're seeing, especially along the Green Line," said St. Paul Planning Director Doug Drummond.

"The overall impact will be a net increase in parkland dedication fees that we collect," Drummond said. "It's really hard for us to estimate how much of an increase it will be, because it's so different from the current formula. The idea is to tie it to the need for parkland generated by people."

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More intense uses -- developments with greater numbers of dwelling units or more retail and office space -- will require more parkland, while warehouse and industrial uses will require less of a contribution. Small projects, such as commercial buildings of less than 5,000 square feet, are exempt from parkland dedication requirements.

RESIDENTIAL COSTS

Residential developments under the proposed changes would kick in \$1,200 per dwelling unit, or up to 4.5 percent of the county assessor's estimated market value of the land parcel.

Calling those requirements meager, the Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County recommended requiring parkland contributions equivalent to 12 percent of the estimated market value of the land under development, roughly equivalent to \$4,000 per residential unit.

The friends organization also asked for more flexibility in terms of where the money is spent, noting that most of the contributions are spent on-site or within a half-mile or so of the development in question.

The St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce has come out strongly against any net increase in the overall amount of parkland. The chamber, in fact, has supported decreasing parkland requirements, or depending on the type of development, eliminating them altogether.

Michael Belaen, the chamber's legal counsel, noted in writing that the Trust for Public Land already ranks St. Paul as one of the best cities in the nation in terms of the amount of parkland per 1,000 residents, compared to cities of a comparable size. St. Paul's ordinance, he said, mandates that cities can require only a "reasonable" proportion of buildable land to be dedicated as a development condition.

Meanwhile, the Minnesota Housing Partnership expressed concern about driving up the cost of affordable housing. The Paul Port Authority supported the staff recommendations as is.

Others also applauded the recommendations.

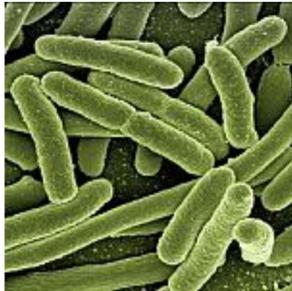
"The relatively small investment in Mears Park immediately paid for itself by dramatically increasing surrounding property valuations," said real estate developer John Mannillo, chair of the Friends of Mears Park, in a letter to the council.

Citing lingering questions and the need for more information, council members decided to revisit the plan on Aug. 12.

Frederick Melo can be reached at 651-228-2172. Follow him at twitter.com/FrederickMelo (<http://twitter.com/FrederickMelo>).

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