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\$60 utility fee weighed

Cost addresses storm runoff

By Andrea Uhde

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Oldham County homeowners would pay an annual \$60 utility fee under a proposal that Fiscal Court soon will consider.

Two members of a committee studying the fee last week recommended the rate, which will help the county meet federal regulations dealing with storm-water runoff.

If Fiscal Court approves the fee, bills would be sent no later than February.

The fee would affect nearly 17,000 owners of single-family homes and duplexes and about 1,000 owners of businesses and multi-family homes. But La Grange residents would not pay the fee because the city is not required to participate.

The \$60 rate is based on the average amount of hard surface, such as concrete and blacktop, on a residential property.

Businesses and multifamily units with more hard surface would be billed more, depending on their size. "We already pay enough fees," said Paul Carley, who owns Latte Café in Crestwood and a house in Oldham County.

"They've already hit us with a raise" in the insurance premium tax, he said, referring to Fiscal Court's decision in November to double the rate to 10 percent. "Now here they go again with some other way that they're trying to bleed us."

The committee of about six city and county officials has been meeting for more than four years to discuss the federal mandates. Judge-Executive Duane Murner and Crestwood Mayor Dennis Deibel were the only members at last week's meeting, and there was not a quorum.

County Attorney John Fendley said it did not violate open meetings rules, and Murner said that the committee is "an informal group" and that Fiscal Court members will be informed that only two members were at the meeting, which several magistrates attended.

The \$60 rate is mid-point between the financial consultant's recommendation of \$81.72 per residence each year and a more bare-bones rate of \$42.24, on average, each year. The rates work for the first five years, but Fiscal Court would have to revisit the rate later, said John Damico, a financial consultant working with the committee.

Murner said he wanted to be sure the rate was enough to cover unexpected costs.

"It is foolish to anticipate there won't be additional demands" from the Environmental Protection Agency, Murner said. "I really don't want to go back and raise people's rates."

Murner said the county doesn't have the people to do the required inspections.

Magistrate Rick Rash, who attended the meeting, pushed for the lower rate, saying Fiscal Court would more likely pass it.

"We have the responsibility to do this as economically as possible," Rash said.

The less costly scenario addresses the minimum requirements of the EPA, Damico said. The committee's recommended rate of \$60 per residence each year would provide money for grant matches, greenway and stream cleanup and the \$260,000 consultant fee.

It also would allow the county to hire an inspector in the first year, while the cheaper scenario calls for hiring an inspector in year three, Damico said.

The money would allow the county to pay for staff, maintenance and other expenses needed to comply with new county ordinances required by the federal government to address storm-water runoff.

The ordinances cover illegal discharges into storm sewers, runoff on construction sites and new developments, and preventing or reducing polluted runoff. They also include public education and public involvement.

The federal requirements are part of the Clean Water Act and aim to keep runoff, including oil and pesticides, from polluting local creeks, rivers and lakes.

The regulations already have been applied to larger communities including Louisville, where residents pay \$60.24 each year, plus an additional \$6.95 each month to meet the mandates.

Oldham County and dozens of other urban areas in Kentucky, including Bowling Green and Bullitt County, are part of the second nationwide phase.

Communities in the second phase that are trying to address drainage problems and pay for permit regulations are charging an average of \$6 to \$8 per single-family home each month, Damico said.

Murner said last week that the committee was also checking to see if the county's cities, except for La Grange, would also have to vote on the fee.

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