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Plan would require land or cash for parks

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MANSFIELD - Developers planning a housing subdivision would have to provide land or cash for a neighborhood park under a proposal that the Planning and Zoning Commission plans to discuss tonight.

The recently completed 10-year master plan identified the city's No. 1 recreational need as neighborhood parks, which consist of about 5 acres with playground equipment and other amenities within walking distance of most homes they serve.

Most of the \$40 million of citywide improvements recommended in the plan -- linear parks, trails, pavilions, aquatic facilities, larger community parks -- will be paid with bonds supported by a half-cent city sales tax for parks. But city officials say neighborhood parks specifically benefit adjacent subdivisions and should be funded by developers, who likely will pass the costs to home buyers.

Mansfield would be following the lead of several Tarrant County cities that require park-land contributions, including Arlington, Fort Worth, Keller, Southlake and Burleson.

"It's something our master plan is showing us we need," said Shelly Lanners, acting director of parks and recreation. "It's a way of developing the quality of life in the city."

The Mansfield Park Facilities Development Corp. board, which administers a half-cent sales tax for park projects, recommended approval of a park-land dedication provision last week. The commission is set to discuss the ordinance tonight and then schedule it for a public hearing and a vote on a recommendation to the City Council.

According to the master plan, the city now has 15 acres of neighborhood parks but needs 60 acres, based on standards for a city with a population of 33,000. Although more than 60 percent of the city is undeveloped, the areas where housing is going up are filling fast and consuming potential park land. At the same time, the city can't build a neighborhood park ahead of development because the park has to fit with the subdivision and rely on its roads and other infrastructure, said park board president Mike Skinner.

Under the proposal, developers would be required to donate 1 acre of land for every 100 dwelling units of a development, which is similar to Cedar Hill's requirement but more than required in Fort Worth and Burleson and less than in Southlake and Keller.

If the required land is less than 5 acres -- the minimum for a neighborhood park -- Mansfield could choose to charge \$500 per unit and use that to buy park land in that same quadrant of the city. If possible, the city would take land donations from two subdivisions for a shared park.

In addition to the land requirements, some cities charge for the improvement to convert the land into a park. Mansfield's charge would be \$750, for a total of \$1,250 worth of land and cash for each lot. That compares with an average of \$765 per lot charged by Arlington, which no longer accepts land donations.

"I'd have to do the math, but on the surface that sounds terribly high," said Larry Nix, a Mansfield resident and a developer who owns All Seasons RV Park in Arlington. "I really don't have a problem with the concept; it's just getting the amount of dedication to a fair number."

Susan Erline White, a senior planner for the Fort Worth parks department, said developers at first complained in April 2000 when the city upgraded its land dedication requirement to include a \$30,000 charge for neighborhood park improvements for each acre of donated land, as well as other potential costs. But now many are supportive, she said.

"As time has gone by the light bulb has come on, and they're seeing park development as a very positive community amenity and marketing tool for their development," White said.

Planning and Zoning

The Mansfield Planning and Zoning Commission will meet at 6:30 tonight at City Hall, 1305 E. Broad St.