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Some fees go down, some up

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It may cost a bit more to do some projects in Watsonville, but it will cost less to do others.

The City Council voted last night to raise fees for a number of services provided by the planning, public works and building departments. It also voted to lower some.

The fees were getting a going over because the city is looking at ways to increase revenue in the face of a \$300,000 hit it took this year when the state took some of the city's tax money to balance its own budget. In the process of looking at how fees could be raised, city staff discovered some charges they felt were too high, and they recommended that they be lowered. The net effect, however, is that the city should bring in about \$22,000 more.

Last night's session was only one of many aimed at raising revenues or reducing costs to make up for the \$300,000.

The greatest number of changes will take place in the Planning Department, where a "General Plan reimbursement" fee, about .5 to 1 percent of the value of the project, will be added.

Planning Director Maureen Owens called the charge "a relatively minimal amount... (and) one of the most equitable ways to spread it out across the community."

Other fees will be decreased in that department. A \$135 fee for sign permits will be eliminated. An administrative review permit, required for the approval of most business licenses, will drop to \$50 from \$135 in most cases. Charges for time-extension permits will also be dropped unless the project is being changed as well as delayed. The fees will drop from \$8,133 to \$500 for such a permit on a tentative map; from \$1,319 to \$329.75 on an extension on a special use permit; from \$678 to \$169.50 for an extension on a variance; from \$865.50 to \$216.30 for an extension on a design review. Streamlined processes make doing these things less costly, Owens said.

Fee increases in the Public Works Department will include utility and concrete permits up to \$50 from \$31.50. Improvements and grading permits up to \$150 from \$104.50 were also approved, along with a charge for microfiling plans in the Building Department.

Councilman Tony Campos wasn't happy with the increases.

"I'm having a hard time increasing fees," he said. Campos said he realized the increases were small, but he said he was worried that

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the fees would just keep creeping up.

City staffers reminded him that the increases were being asked specifically to make up for the money taken by the state.

Councilman Parr Eves said the city is having to make up for the fact that fees had been kept low for years. "It's a position we've inherited," he said.

Councilman Lowell Hurst asked how close the fees were to covering the actual costs of the services. Owens said she thought the time-extension permit charges covered staff time, but that the General Plan fee wouldn't come close to covering the cost of doing the General Plan, now at about \$200,000.

"It seems to me that we're losing money on everything we do," Campos said.

"We make up for it in volume," joked Councilman Todd McFarren. McFarren said later that the taxpayers are supporting some of the cost of development.

The fee adjustments were praised last night by Mark Myers, the co-chairman of the Government Relations Subcommittee of the Economic Development Department (part of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce). Myers said when it comes to fee increases for businesses and developers, for his group, it's "a fairly standard knee-jerk reaction to oppose it."

But, he said, the subcommittee examined the fees and found them to be "in fact, justified." Myers praised the staff's "self-audit" which resulted in the fee decreases.

Mayor Oscar Rios agreed, adding that the cuts were a reflection of the fact that "we're trying to cut some of the bureaucracy."