

Churches lose bid for exemption from flood-control fees

County officials
promise to
review fee
schedule with
eye toward
reductions

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Pajaro Valley churches and private schools didn't win their bid for an exemption from flood-control fees last night, but county officials agreed to review the fee schedule with an eye toward reductions.

Led by All Saints' Episcopal

Church, in Watsonville, representatives of eight churches and private schools sought an exemption from fees last night from the Zone 7 Flood Control District, formed two years ago by county supervisors.

The churches and schools argued that they are nonprofit agencies and shouldn't be charged the

fee. "We call it a tax," said Don Cooley, a member of the budget committee at All Saints'.

No vote on the exemption issue was taken because there weren't enough Zone 7 directors present for a majority vote. Ray Belgard, Fred Keeley and Betty Bobeda opposed the exemption, and Walt Symons favored it. Directors Gary

Patton and Jan Beautz were absent, and board chairman Ed Kelly had to abstain because his wife is the financial director for Notre Dame School.

Four votes were needed to pass any motion. With no vote, the churches and schools must still pay the fees they've been charged: \$120 an acre, the same as com-

mercial and industrial properties. The residential fee is \$18 per parcel.

The fee is based on how much storm runoff is likely to come from a property, and the fee for commercial and industrial land is based on the assumption that the vast majority of the property is

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paved or built on.

Churches and schools that appeal their fees stand a "strong likelihood of substantial reduction," said county Public Works Director John Fantham.

The charge for All Saints' has already been cut from \$400 to \$240 after a staff review showed there's less runoff potential than for most commercial uses, Fantham said.

Fantham said he will follow the suggestion of Zone 7 directors to explore the possibility of setting up a separate category for churches and private schools. By law, public schools are exempt from the fee.

Zone 7 fees, which began a year ago, are on a schedule to quadruple by 1999.

That was a key concern of those who spoke last night, saying their churches are facing tight budgets. "If we keep shifting taxes to fees, we'll have fees and no taxes," said Ray AmRhein, representing the Salesian Sisters school in Corralitos.

The 58-acre school had a fee of

\$4,548 last year, which Fantham said should drop substantially if there's an appeal. Fantham said after the meeting it would have taken too much staff time to set different fees for every non-residential parcel when the flood-control district was formed.

In supporting the exemption, Symons referred to statements made by church representatives of the charity work done by the churches and their history of being exempt from taxes.

Symons, who has pushed for less taxation as a county supervisor, said the flood-control fees "don't reduce the cost of government."

Belgard, who pushed for formation of Zone 7 as supervisor for the Watsonville area, said the budget was predicated on the fees now being charged. He said he'd consider charging the churches a different rate.

Mike Kostyal, a Cabrillo College trustee who lives in the Interlaken area off College Road, opposed the churches' request, saying an exemption would shift the cost onto the rest of the community.

The Zone 7 directors don't meet again until January.