Planners to talk zoning law reform

Fees, petition threshold, increased public awareness among ideas to be aired

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WALHALLA — The eyes of Oconee County property owners will be closely watching the Planning Commission tonight as planners consider changes to the Zoning Enabling Ordinance.

One issue commissioners are expected to take up is the need for some type of a fee structure to help pay incidental costs associated with processing a citizen-initiated rezoning petition.

IF YOU GO

What: Planning Commission workshop
When: 6 tonight
Where: Council Chambers, 415 S. Pine St., Walhalla

For instance, a petition drive dealing with about 400 parcels requires that the Planning Department mail out notices to all parties involved. Just in postage alone, the costs add up.

Planning Department Director Art Holbrooks said Tuesday that $6,000 was included to cover zoning costs in the current budget that expires June 30.

"The biggest expense so far has been for ink to produce the color maps," Holbrooks said.

Holbrooks said his office did not request an increase in the operational budget for the new fiscal year.

According to Holbrooks, it was the Planning Commission that decided not to include a fee for the first citizens-initiated petitions. He said the fear was that in the weak economy, a fee could have been a burden on landowners that inherited land and could be struggling to pay property taxes.

Commissioner Ryan Honea said Monday that he always was in favor of having a fee. He recalls that the commission and County Council never could agree on a number.

Honea said that even if the fee were $1 per parcel, it would generate hundreds of dollars to cover some of the costs.

Holbrooks said a $25 fee is in the law, but it applies only to property owners in an

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area that's already been rezoned and would like to rezone to another classification. However, it does not apply to the initial rezoning petition.

Another issue likely to come up tonight is the 51 percent majority needed for a petition to proceed.

Commission Chairman Tommy Abbott is suggesting that the threshold be the same as the one used by South Carolina for annexation, which is 75 percent. He also recommends that 75 percent of the petitioners in agreement own 75 percent of the parcels to be rezoned.

Commission Vice Chairman Howard Moore also is calling for reforms. He said he would like to add a 24-hour hotline for more information. He said notices should also list options available to property owners in the midst of a petition drive.

Commissioners' discontent with the ZEO spilled over when County Council sent them overlapping petitions to review. The commission has a moratorium in place.

The commission has its regular meeting Monday.

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