

Business Gets L.A. to Back Down on Planning Fees

development: City official ordered to draft plan for smaller increases.

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Developers and business groups have made some headway in pushing to head off steep increases in L.A. city planning fees.

The City Council earlier this month agreed that the proposed fees – that in some cases were five times higher than current ones – were too onerous and ordered Planning Director Gail Goldberg to report back next month with a detailed schedule of smaller fee increases.

“We think we have made great progress,” said Veronica Perez Becker, vice president of legislative affairs for the Central City Association, which represents downtown business and development interests.

Earlier this year, the city Planning Department had proposed sharp increases in development application fees as a way to generate more revenue to cover the department’s operating costs. With the city facing a \$500 million deficit, all departments have been ordered to recoup as much as they can in cost outlays for services.

For example, a developer’s application fee for an exemption to an area’s specific plan would have risen from \$4,000 to \$15,000, while the fee for a height limit exemption would have risen from \$2,400 to \$11,000.

The Central City Association, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and other business groups vigorously opposed the increases, saying they would choke off projects at a time when development is needed most.

The groups also sought more guarantees that the Planning Department would meet state-mandated timetables for project approvals. Currently, the department is meeting those mandates less than half the time, Becker said. The chamber is calling for partial fee refunds to developers if city planners fail to meet the timetable deadlines.

Goldberg told the council July 1 that the department would scale back many of the fee increases and comply with the state timetables for a certain percentage of projects.

Goldberg also agreed to eliminate an additional 4 percent fee on most permit applications and to offer developers of large projects a choice to pay an upfront fee or an hourly rate for city staff time.

The council ordered Goldberg to report back to it with specific figures before the beginning of August.

Disease Protection

California is about to become the first state in the nation to enact rules to protect employees from exposure to infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, measles or H1N1, better known as swine flu.

The rules, approved in May by the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board, will take effect Aug. 5. They apply to any facility that treats, diagnoses or houses people with illnesses, including hospitals, clinics, nursing care facilities, correctional facilities and homeless shelters. The rules also will cover emergency responders, chiefly fire department personnel and paramedics.

Currently there are no specific statewide requirements outlining responsibilities that employers must use to address transmissible diseases as a workplace safety hazard for their employees.

Under the new rules, health care employers and supervisors at other facilities where people may be ill must develop exposure control procedures and train employees to follow them. Basic practices such as hand-washing, cleaning and decontamination procedures must also be observed.

“This is designed to protect employees who are likely to come in contact with transmittable diseases, which is especially significant due to recent events such as the H1N1 swine flu outbreak,” said John Duncan, director of the state Department of Industrial Relations, which oversees the standards board.

Deadline Extended

Cargo handling equipment owners at the state’s ports and rail yards have been granted another reprieve to solve a stubborn problem: How to dispose of old yard trucks, forklifts and equipment that have been taken out of use because they no longer meet state emission standards.

Under a 2005 measure adopted by the California Air Resources Board, cargo handling equipment owners are required to sell, scrap or move old equipment out of state and switch to newer equipment between 2007 and 2010, depending on the age of the equipment.

But it proved expensive to scrap or move the old equipment and difficult to find buyers, especially as trade volumes began to plummet after last fall’s financial crisis. So, in January, the Air Resources Board granted cargo-handling equipment owners a grace period of 18 months to dispose of their old equipment, provided all batteries, oil and fuel were removed.

Yet even this grace period proved insufficient as the trade crisis deepened and old equipment was still sitting on terminals and rail yards. So, late last month, the Air Resources Board extended the grace period to a maximum of three years.

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