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Ocean City scraps plan to charge drivers for crashes

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OCEAN CITY - The city will not charge hapless drivers a car-crash fee.

City Council scrapped the idea of charging to clean up accident sites Thursday after deciding the bills would generate too much resentment among tourists, most of whom arrive by car.

The proposal shows the extensive lengths this resort town is reaching to find new sources of money in a tight economy.

The ordinance proposed by Mayor Sal Perillo would have charged a three-tiered fee of \$435 to \$1,200 to cut accident victims out of wreckage and clean up after fender-benders.

The fee would have raised more than \$25,000 per year for city coffers, Fire Chief Joseph Foglio Jr. said.

Firefighters responded to 232 car accidents with injuries last year, he said. The city already charges for ambulance rides.

"The three-tier system is basically: if it's a mess, we'll clean it up. The vast majority of calls will be Level 1. Level 2 will be if we have an accident and have to get someone out of the car using light tools. We'll make sure the person is stabilized and clean up the mess. Level 3 is self-explanatory. We cut someone out of the car," Foglio said.

The idea was modeled after a similar pricing plan in Winter Park, Fla., he said.

"It's more or less a sign of the times," the chief said.

Resident Pete Guinasso said the fee was nothing more than a hidden tax - and an unjustifiable one for property owners who already pay for salaries and equipment at the Fire Department.

Councilman Roy Wagner said residents in his 4th Ward suggested the next step would be charging residents to put out house fires.

"More will be lost in public relations and our image than will be gained," he said.

Perillo proposed the fee to recover some of the city's considerable emergency-services costs, including the extrication equipment and the gear to clean up antifreeze and other hazardous materials, the mayor said.

"To me it's no different than if they did damage to city property," he said of the bills.

Coincidentally, the Fire Department has been working without a contract since Jan. 1, 2007, and is in

binding arbitration now.

"The goal of this is to pass the costs along to the insurance companies," Perillo said.

He said the fees would have little effect on Ocean City drivers' insurance rates.

"We're talking about the proverbial drop in the bucket. This is \$25,000 spread over the 3 million or 4 million people who come to Ocean City every year. I can't imagine this would have any significant impact," he said.

But that argument did not go over well with council members such as Michael Allegretto, who noted that the costs inevitably would sift down to Ocean City residents through their insurance premiums.

"My insurance goes up every year, and I don't have accidents or tickets. It's still being paid by the local Joe, the local taxpayer," Allegretto said. "This isn't something you choose to do. It's something that happens to you. That's why it's called an accident, not an on-purpose."

Councilwoman Susan Sheppard said the fee would leave an indelible impression on the island's car-crash victims.

"I paid \$4,000 to stay here and now I have to pay \$1,000 because I got rear-ended? For the amount of return, it's just not worth it," she said.

The ordinance failed on second reading after none of the seven members made a motion to introduce it.

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