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## No response fees for accidents in Two Rivers

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TWO RIVERS — Motorists who cause accidents in the city will not have to pay a fee when police officers or firefighters respond, the Two Rivers City Council decided Monday evening.

Members of the public crowded the council chambers, many of them speaking out against the proposed fees and none speaking in favor of the proposal.

"I can only give so much money, even in an accident," said Don Polifka, who said he was representing people like himself who are on a budget. "I'm a little guy trying to make it in this town. I don't need a user's fee if I have a minor accident."

The proposed fees included charging the at-fault driver \$175 for police response to a motor vehicle accident and \$250 or \$350 for firefighter response, depending on the level of service needed.

No other communities in Wisconsin have been identified as charging for police response to accidents, and the issue has focused media attention on Two Rivers.

"What bothers me most is the black eye that Two Rivers is getting from all of this," said resident Warren Otto.

He said Two Rivers would be the "laughingstock" if the fees were implemented.

"Two Rivers is on the map for the wrong reasons," said John Monka, a former council member.

"You think people are going to want to come here?" asked Paul Ruthmansdorfer, referring to groups promoting the area in an attempt to draw people.

City Manager Greg Buckley and Police Chief Joe Collins proposed the fees during the budget process as a way to keep taxes down. The 2008 budget includes \$32,000 in revenue from the proposed accident response fees. Without that revenue, taxes would have increased by an additional \$6 for the owner of a \$100,000 home.

If the police and fire departments need more money, "I'll pay the six bucks," said Mark Rudebeck, comparing that to the \$175 he would pay if he caused an accident.

"My math isn't that good, but it's good enough to know I'd be way ahead paying the six bucks," he said.

Council member Jim Taddy said even though the tax increase would be only \$6, he thinks charging the at-fault motorists would be "more fair to our citizens" than increasing taxes.

He questioned why "the people that know how to drive" should have to pay.

"Maybe the responsibility should be on the person that was in the accident," he said.

Two Rivers is a "retired community," said Leroy Staff, noting that young people and older adults have the most accidents, and those are the groups that can least afford such a fee.

Someone who causes an accident isn't necessarily a bad person, Staff said.

"He or she feels bad enough about their mistake," he said.

Buckley has said in the past he believed the motorists' insurance companies would pick up most of the cost of the fees.

Jeanette Greenwood, a 17-year-old senior at Two Rivers High School, said she had called some insurance companies to ask whether they would pay the fees. Not a single company called by Greenwood and another person indicated they would pay, she said.

"It's very much up in the air whether insurance would cover it or not," Buckley said.

Council member Brian Powell said implementing the fees had seemed like a good idea when Buckley and Collins presented it during the budget work session, but they had indicated other communities in Wisconsin were charging the fees and that insurance would cover them. Powell said now he has heard from a number of sources that insurance companies would not pay.

"This is not something I feel that Two Rivers should be a leader at," Powell said.

He would be in favor of revisiting the issue if charging such fees becomes a widespread practice in Wisconsin.

The resolution before the council included emergency fees the city already charges, such as for ambulance service, as well as the proposed new fees and increases in some of the existing fees. Council member Wayne Schultz proposed adopting the resolution with the elimination of the increases and the new fees.

Frank Bauknecht was absent, Taddy abstained, and the remaining seven council members voted in favor of the resolution.

The council will look at ways to cut the 2008 budget.

Schultz said people don't want to pay user fees and also don't want their property taxes to increase, but they can't continue to receive the same services without an increase in taxes or fees.

"It doesn't end here this evening," he said, referring to issues the city faces.

Everyone who has ideas needs to contribute, Schultz said.

"These council chambers ought to be packed like this every time we have a meeting," he said.

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