City Council rejects development appeal fee

BACKLASH: Pressure from community prompts decision

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
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Under pressure from neighborhood councils and community groups, the Los Angeles City Council on Wednesday rejected a planned increase in the fees charged to appeal city planning and development decisions.

The proposal by Councilman Ed Reyes called for the Planning, and Building and Safety departments to revive studies from earlier this year on the fees charged to appeal their decisions.

“We want to make sure everyone is comfortable with what we’re doing,” Reyes said. “Despite our hearings earlier this year, there is new attention to this issue.”

The fees for appeals were slated to increase from $74 to $150 for Planning Department decisions.

The Planning Department, which estimated that some appeals cost the city as much as $13,000 to process, was facing pressure to generate revenue to cover its costs.

It was estimated the higher fees would bring in up to $6 million.

Councilman Richard Alarcón protested the city having any fees and the appearance it was favoring developers.

“If we are going to have an appeal process that is legal, it should be subsidized by taxpayer dollars,” Alarcón said. “It should be part of the democratic process. But we should not be supporting developers.

“I don’t want to see a fee that has a chilling effect on those who live in an area.”

But Councilman Greig Smith said there has been a problem with abuse of the system.

"We’ve all seen cases where people who live five miles away from a project file an appeal because they are aligned with a group that fights development," Smith said. "What we
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are looking at is trying to raise the fees by those who live outside the obvious community of interest.

"We can't afford to pay $13,000 for every one of these people who abuse the system."

Councilwoman Janice Hahn argued, however, that the city cannot blame its budget problems in order to assess the fees.

"Let's not use the budget-crisis mentality to prevent us from delivering services," Hahn said.

Reyes said the Planning Department has suffered dramatically from budget reductions, going from a staff of 400 two years ago to 290 now, and is facing even more losses with the proposed early retirement program being offered workers.