

Homeowners caught up in Portland sidewalk infill measure aimed at developers

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Unimproved or under improved streets, lacking sidewalks or stormwater drainage, are common in parts of outer East Portland. (*Michael Lloyd/File*)

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The Oregonian/OregonLive

Mavis Willford had taken out a loan to replace her manufactured home, which had mold and rot issues, with a new one.

But when Willford, a cook for the David Douglas school district, applied for a permit to install the new home, she was told she would be charged \$54,000 for sidewalks, nearly half of what she'll pay for the new home.

"We don't even have sidewalks in this part of the city," she said. "It was like they were holding my property hostage."

The unexpected bill was a Local Transportation Infrastructure Charge, created in 2016 to help fill out the city's patchy sidewalk grid.

It requires property owners who build on a street without curbs or sidewalks to either build the street improvements themselves or pay \$600 per linear foot of street frontage. The idea was that developers would pick up the tab for filling in gaps in areas built without sidewalks or stormwater drainage.

The problem, according to City Ombudsman Margie Sollinger and equity office Director Dante James, is that the policy treats all property owners the same. That means not just developers, but also low-income homeowners seeking to rebuild or replace their own home, get eye-popping bills when they go in for permits.

The Portland City Council on Wednesday will consider how to spend the money it's collected since the policy took effect in 2016. Sollinger and James are asking them to also consider measures that would mitigate the impact on homeowners, such as exempting low-income residents or making financing available.

"Simply stated, a policy that treats everyone equally does not result in equity," they wrote.

Willford was offered the choice to build sidewalks and curbs herself that would end at her property line, or to pay into a fund to build sidewalks -- most likely somewhere else.

Willford plead her case to city officials, Gov. Kate Brown's office, and eventually to Sollinger, the ombudsman. Sollinger talked to the city transportation bureau, which waived the fee under a limited exemption.

But, Sollinger said, that exemption likely wouldn't be available to most homeowners.

The ordinance the city council will discuss Wednesday would limit the charges to \$30,000 in the most common residential zones, an attempt to rein in extra-high fees charged to corner lots and other unusual properties.

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This story has been edited to reflect the following correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported the threshold for the Local Transportation Infrastructure Charge. The charge is levied when a home is newly constructed or rebuilt, but not by minor improvements.