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Jeffersonville City Council likely to postpone ordinance

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— A proposed ordinance that would allow Jeffersonville's police and fire departments to charge user fees for vehicle crashes will likely be tabled at Monday's City Council meeting, according to the measure's sponsor.

Councilman Keith Fetz scheduled the legislation for the first of three readings Monday, but said he will likely postpone the reading after learning that an Ohio community repealed a similar ordinance in September, 11 months after it was enacted.

"It's really not a good deal," said Ron Gauthier, president of the city council in Stow, Ohio. "You're not going to recover that much money and the publicity it generates will be detrimental to your City Council, your mayor and your police and fire departments."

On Sept. 14, Stow's council voted 7-0 to rescind its ordinance that allowed its police department to charge fees for responding to traffic accidents. The panel ordered the immediate cessation of the collection of the fees, instructed the city's mayor to refund all money collected and gives the city until the end of the year to provide Dayton, Ohio-based Cost Recovery Corp. with a letter stating that the company's contract will not be renewed.

In late August, the Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal documented a $401.08 bill sent to Stow resident Alex Patterson, 18, following a minor crash in his hometown. Cost Recovery Corp.'s charges included a $125 fine, $38.08 for a police investigation, $209.44 for the police vehicle to come to the scene and $28.56 for paperwork.

Gauthier said that before Stow enacted its fees, a representative of Cost Recovery Corp. indicated that bills would be sent to motorists' insurance companies and that if insurers failed to pay, additional bills would be sent only to non-residents who had been responsible for crashes in Stow.

Cost Recovery Corp. president Regina Moore made a similar sales pitch to the Jeffersonville City Council during a workshop on Sept. 18.

"It escalated to the point that everybody went berserk," Gauthier said. "The insurance companies were apparently saying, 'No, we're not paying this.'"

Another unexpected problem, Gauthier said, is that residents of neighboring communities who work in Stow pay a 2 percent occupational tax, which is used for police and fire services. He said charging fees for police runs to vehicle crashes amounted to "double taxation."

"I'll probably ask (other council members) to table it until we can get some clarification," Fetz said, adding that learning of Stow's experience "definitely changes my opinion."

Jeffersonville's ordinance would allow a for-profit company such as Cost Recovery Corp. to bill for police and fire responses to vehicle crashes based on national average rates for the services provided. The billing service would get paid by adding a fee to the invoice sent to the insurance company of the motorist responsible for a crash, or to the motorists themselves, if their insurers refused to pay the bills.

The money collected in Jeffersonville would be placed in a non-reverting fund and would be used to pay for police and fire equipment. Fetz said council members have had ongoing discussions about how to find

money to help better equip the city's police and fire departments without increasing taxes or reducing funding for other city services.

During an interview on Friday evening, Fetz said he planned to call Gauthier to discuss Stow's attempts to collect the fees. He said the ordinance he had proposed Monday will likely be tabled until the council can review other communities' experiences with the fees and Moore can appear before the panel to answer additional questions.

Gauthier said he believes several southern Ohio communities have had some success implementing the same types of fees that did not work in Stow. And the Chiefland (Fla.) Citizen recently reported that Belleview, Fla. collected between $8,000 and $10,000 in the fees during the first half of this year.