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Wednesday, November 2, 2005

Rochester to allow tax increment financing districts

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ROCHESTER — By a 9-3 vote, the City Council on Tuesday adopted enabling legislation to create tax increment financing, or TIF, districts.

This allows the city to create one or more districts where public improvements are needed. As district properties are developed or upgraded, and an increase in their taxable value occurs, the difference between the district's original tax base and the new value will consist of the increment, and a portion of such can go back into the district, though the council can allocate some to the general fund.

The revenue can go toward acquiring land easements, building parking garages, roads or bridges — such as the proposed Route 125-Route 11 connector bridge — extending water and sewer lines and utilities, installing lights, improving landscaping, or planning and engineering for such projects.

But some councilors expressed concerns with the program, saying there are too many unknowns about it to move ahead and it's not something needed here because there are no blighted areas.

Ward 4 Councilor Bob Goldstein said he was wary of its pitfalls. He said unless the council is fully aware of all the ins and outs of the state program the city may be getting into something it didn't bargain for.

"You have to be extremely careful and I'm afraid sometimes when you give somebody a tool and they're not knowledgeable of how every little aspect of that tool works, it can end up nipping your finger, and this is what I want to be extremely careful of," he said.

Goldstein said the program may bring different rewards for different areas of the city, explaining areas with abandoned buildings will bring different returns than districts encompassing an area already growing economically.

Ward 2 Councilor Sandra Keans opposed the program's adoption on the grounds the city doesn't have any areas that typically satisfy TIF districts needing to be revitalized.

"I don't see it as a tool that this community needs at this point," she said.

Keans also said adopting the legislation now was bad timing as the current council readies itself for changes following next week's election. Two of the programs' supporters — Councilors Alan Reed-Erickson of Ward 5 and Marilyn Berry of Ward 4 — are both not seeking re-election. Another supporter, Ward 3 Councilor John Larochele, is running for mayor.



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Ward 5 Councilor Ralph Torr also voted against its adoption.

Some of the opposition was countered by councilors who favor TIF. Reed-Erickson said TIF doesn't just help blighted areas, and he added that creating districts will be a thoroughly vetted process. Berry said there's no harm having the ability to create districts, saying, "Why not have it sitting there waiting to be used?"

City Manager Bob Steele said the city can't wait until a TIF-worthy project presents itself to move for its adoption.

In the past, Economic Development Manager Karen Pollard laid out for councilors how TIF works. She has said it is a "powerful tool" that helps fund necessary improvements to the city's infrastructure.

Now that RSA 162-K was adopted, the city needs to define and map one or more districts and appoint a TIF advisory board and district administrator.

From there the committee will have to lay out where infrastructure improvements are needed and prepare potential tax increment revenues of the proposed areas with a corresponding cost-benefit analysis of public improvement projects.

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