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El Dorado Hills weighs raising fees for upkeep of parks

dlambert@sacbee.com

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El Dorado Hills is so wealthy that its parks are suffering.

The well-heeled enclave of 42,078 at the foot of El Dorado County's western slope had an average household income of \$97,711, more than double the state average, as of the 2000 U.S. census.

This makes the area ineligible for most park bonds and grants, said Wayne Lowery, general manager of the El Dorado Hills Community Services District.

Now the district, which cares for area parks, is \$30 million short of the \$92 million needed to fund its 15-year master plan, adopted last year.

The district hopes residents will agree to higher fees for parks and recreational facilities.

District staff members plan to meet with homeowners beginning next week to discuss increasing fees in their neighborhood landscape and lighting assessment districts, which finance the maintenance of parks and nature areas around the community.

This year, eight of the district's 22 landscape and lighting assessment districts were subsidized by a total of \$177,000 from the CSD's general fund. The increased levies will permit the district to stop the subsidies, Lowery said.

Fees in one assessment district could double, Lowery said. Residents in the Silva Valley assessment district – one of five deficient districts being addressed this year – pay \$197 a year for a collective total of \$74,380. The district had to spend \$62,352 from general monies to pay the balance of operational costs in the Silva district.

Lowery said that the CSD has only three options: borrow from the general fund, increase assessments or decrease service.

He said the district's board isn't likely to borrow, so he's betting that residents will agree to a rate increase.

"If they say 'less service,' I think they're bluffing," Lowery said.

John Thomson, a resident in the Bass Lake B assessment district served by the CSD, disagrees. He says the chance residents will vote an increase in their assessments is "slim to none."

"Some of my neighbors have complained that it is an awful lot of money spent on mowing grass

and keeping the lights on," Thomson said.

If the vote doesn't pass in an assessment district, Lowery says the district may have to cut back on the replacement of fencing and landscaping.

"You might see a lot more weeds," he said.

Lowery expects that the district can hold special elections to vote on increased fees in the individual assessment districts in May or June.

The community services district offers park and recreation services, cable TV service, refuse collection, street landscape management, design review approval and enforcement of covenants, conditions and restrictions in an area of about 28 square miles.

Lowery fears the district's future.

He says it has had a fairly stable economy because of fees from new development, but he doesn't know where the money will come from when the area is built out.

And the chance the district will be the beneficiary of any new grants or state park bonds is bleak.

"The last few parks bonds have been competitive," said Allison Hamaker, the district's finance director. "They have various requirements. They (districts) must be rural or they must be urban. Per capita income can't be over a certain amount."

She said private foundation grants also usually consider socioeconomics.

"There's a lot of money to help depressed areas, that's true."

Call The Bee's Diana Lambert, (916) 478-2672.