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PARK DISTRICT PROTESTS REMOVAL OF FEE FROM NOVEMBER BALLOT

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A recently formed district that plans to maintain parks in the New Albany area is protesting a decision to keep off the November ballot a fee to fund its operations.

The Franklin County Board of Elections decided last week not to allow the issue on the ballot.

Ed Leonard, deputy elections director, said yesterday that the board's legal counsel cited numerous defects in the ballot proposal, which was offered by the New Albany Plain Local Joint Parks District.

Leonard said Doug Browell, assistant Franklin County prosecutor, said that only a faxed copy of the ballot issue was submitted and there was no certificate from the park board formally requesting that it be placed on the ballot.

Leonard said a meeting will be scheduled for consideration of the district's protest.

Keith M. Karr, chairman of the New Albany Plain Local Joint Parks District board, questioned the elections board's decision.

He said the requested fee -- \$250 fee on all purchases of new homes and sales of existing homes within the district -- would be a good way to manage parks. He filed the protest on behalf of the board late Monday afternoon.

Karr said he thinks Ohio law clearly allows the district, formed in April, to assess and collect fees through the Franklin County auditor's office, just as a tax levy would be collected.

"We don't know the process for the hearing yet, but we'll move forward and see how it proceeds," he said.

The village of New Albany, Plain Township and the New Albany-Plain Local School District agreed to form the district, after a yearlong study by a citizens committee.

"We thought the transfer fee would be the best way to finance the district," Karr said. "Everyone within the park district would be treated equally."

Parks and recreation facilities often are operated by one taxing district and nonresidents pay extra to participate. Karr said the district wanted to serve the whole community without confusion about fees.

New Albany already has a \$150 fee on all residential real-estate transfers within the village to fund parks, he said. The village has agreed to rescind that fee if the joint district proposal is approved.

Karr said the minimal amount needed per year to keep up parks in the district is \$60,000. There is no estimate of what the fee would generate.

The district proposes to lease parks from the village and the township, believing joint operation would be more economical than separate operations. Immediate plans would involve Swickard Woods and Bevelheimer parks in the village, and Harlem Road Park, owned by the township.

Park district officials expect grants and donations to provide other park revenue. The district, for example, could seek a capital-improvements tax levy to finance major improvements. Karr said a new swimming pool is one facility mentioned for the future, to replace the aging township pool.

As the park district gets off the ground, Plain Township Clerk Rebecca Rousseau has volunteered to act as treasurer for the joint park district. Township Administrator J.B. Bowe is acting as director.

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