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steady.

May. 24, 2013

MYRTLE BEACH — Some municipalities along South Carolina's Grand Strand have begun to look at fee increases as a way to bolster revenue while keeping residents' property tax rates steady.

Myrtle Beach passed first reading of an ordinance last week that included increases in sewer, stormwater, ambulance and fire safety inspection fees. The proposed budget does not increase the 66.1 mills property tax rate.

In Surfside Beach, town staff is considering increasing fees for permits and business licenses and charging for fire safety inspections. No decision has been made regarding the property tax rate, said Surfside Beach town administrator Micki Fellner.

There is no charge for fire safety inspections of commercial properties in any S.C. municipality, according to Myrtle Beach fire Battalion Chief Bruce Arnel.

During Myrtle Beach's budget retreat in April, fire Chief Alvin Payne said the department was looking at ways to increase revenue. Payne suggested the city begin charging for fire safety inspections.

Under the proposed budget, the fire department would charge owners of commercial properties at least \$75 to be inspected. The fee is listed in tiers according to size, ranging from \$75 for the initial inspection of commercial properties less than 1,000 square feet to \$300 for properties that are 50,000 square feet or more.

A 30-day re-inspection is included, if necessary. The fee is \$100 for each subsequent inspection.

Myrtle Beach held a public hearing May 14 to discuss the new fire safety inspection

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Fellner said Surfside Beach is looking at nearby municipalities to determine if the fee increases make sense for them, adding that any change might not happen in this year's budget talks — or at all.

"It depends on what we find when we're gathering our information and then what council wants to do," she said.

During a budget workshop last week, Fellner told Town Council a tax increase would be the most logical way to increase revenue in Surfside Beach.

Taxes in Surfside Beach could be increased by as much as 9.9 percent or 3.96 mills, Fellner said, which would be \$16 per \$100,000 of house value.

Myrtle Beach aims to increase revenue by upping the city's fire and emergency medical service fees to make them in line with the county's fees, and also improve the way those fees are collected.

Under the current fee schedule, a city resident would pay \$350 for basic life support or \$450 to \$550 for advanced life support transport. Horry County charges residents \$450 for basic life support and \$700 to \$800 for advance life support transport.

Payne said his department also hopes to change collection agencies, which could potentially increase their revenue as well. He said the collection agency the department currently uses is not very aggressive and bid for a new agency is out.

"Right now we only collect about 50 percent of our [fees]," he said. "So hopefully we'll see some more money coming in with [the use of a new agency]."

As for other proposed increases in Myrtle Beach, the budget increases the storm water rate by 75 cents a month. Residents would also see a 3.7 to 4 percent increase in their sewer and water bills, based on a 7.5 percent increase in the sewer rate.

The increase in the sewer rate is due to an anticipated increase in the wholesale rates

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rates, 8 cents and 10 cents, respectively, according to city spokesman Pat Dowling. There is no plan to raise the property tax rate, which totals 38 mills — six of which go to fund the 60-acre North Myrtle Beach Park & Sports Complex, Dowling said

The Horry County Council has not proposed any fee increases but is debating a possible 3.5 millage property tax increase to fund fire rescue. At an Horry County Council workshop last week, fire Chief Fred Crosby said the increase will ensure that nearly 30 positions remain in the department and money is available to replace aging equipment.

The 3.5 mills Horry County fire officials want equates to \$14 for every \$100,000 of a homeowner's assessed property.

Conway's proposed budget does not include any fee or millage increases, said Mayor Alys Lawson.

All municipalities have until June 30 to approve their fiscal year 2014 budgets, which begin July 1.

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