

Opinion: Fix flawed fire fee before it goes up in smoke

By George Skelton, Los Angeles Times

On the surface, the new state fire fee passed by the Legislature and signed by Gov. Jerry Brown seems prudent and fair. It requires people who live in woodsy and brushy terrain, being soothed by nature, to pay a larger share of their fire protection costs.

But this legislation was written in such haste, without public scrutiny or Capitol vetting, that no one really is sure how it's going to work. It was cobbled together at the last moment before the Legislature's June 15 budget deadline in order to help balance the deficit-ridden general fund.

And it smacks of Democratic payback for the Republicans' refusal to vote for Brown's tax proposal. Republican legislators represent most of the rural areas targeted for fire fees.

A couple of obstacles loom, however, before Sacramento can pocket the fee money.

The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Assn. intends to sue, claiming that the fee actually is a tax. Therefore it should have required a two-thirds vote in the Legislature, not a simple majority. The bill passed pretty much on a party line vote.

Republican state Sen. Ted Gaines (R-Roseville) is trying to generate support for a ballot referendum to repeal the fee. He needs to collect 505,000 voter signatures by Oct. 6 and concedes "it's an uphill battle."

The cost of collecting enough signatures will be at least \$2 million. There's not enough at stake for special interests or

deep-pocket types to bankroll such a venture. The proposed annual fee, per habitable structure, is capped at \$150.

“Maybe it’ll catch fire,” Gaines told me, not really intending the pun. “It could take off with folks of a populist perspective. It’s another intrusion of government coming at the people’s wallet.”

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