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Lake's plan to hike school fee would put it 2nd in U.S.

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Lake County will have the second-highest school-impact fee in the country if its proposed rate increase is approved, according to a national consulting firm.

The Lake County School Board voted this week to more than double its school-impact fees to $14,646 for single-family homes, up from the $7,055 fee that new residents have paid since 2004.

The school-impact fee also would be the highest school fee in Florida, according to Duncan Associates, a Texas-based firm that released its report in August.

Stafford County Public Schools in Virginia has the highest school-impact fees in the nation, at $17,602 for each new single-family home, according to the firm.

Lake County School Board members said they aren't concerned about the rankings. What matters most is getting money to build schools.

"The fee is what it is," said School Board member Cindy Barrow. "The study does justify what the means are."

Other school districts would probably merit fees higher than Lake's proposal if they were to update their impact-fee studies, said School Board Chairman Larry Metz. The board based its proposal on a June study by Henderson Young & Company.

"It's supposed to close the gap in our funding so that we don't have a list of unfunded projects in our capital plan," Metz said. "It sounds very Draconian to have a 100 percent increase, but it's been three years now."

The School Board pays almost $70,000 every month for the 466 portables in the district this year, Barrow said.

Even though the School Board voted for the increase this week, the final decision rests with the Lake County Commission.

Home builders who fought the road-impact fees said raising the rates would hurt an already struggling industry. They say raising the school-impact fee won't do any good, either.

"Housing's down by 60 percent in Lake County and we're not going to see any recovery by 2010 of any significance," said Don Magruder, vice president of Ro-Mac Lumber & Supply Inc. He suggested creating special assessments for neighborhoods that need more schools.

"The state of Florida is in an economic crisis, partly because of what's going on in the housing industry," said Edie Ousley, spokeswoman of the Florida Home Builders Association. "The state of Florida is having to adjust its budget . . . because the housing industry is in a serious downturn. But in Lake County, they're doing the exact opposite."

If the Lake County Commission approves the school district's request, Lake will have the third highest amount for total impact fees in Florida -- $17,617.

Osceola -- which currently has the most expensive school-impact fees in the state -- is second on that list, with $17,941 in total impact fees, including $9,981 for schools.

Collier County is No. 1 with $31,358 in total impact fees for single-family homes.

The Lake County School Board's request won't be the last of ever-increasing impact fees, experts say.

That is because construction costs are going up and the state is starting to pass the tab to local governments, said James C. Nicholas, an impact-fee expert and retired professor from the University of Florida's environmental and land-use law program.

"The impact fee is just exploding. Even though it's not very popular, the alternatives are less popular," Nicholas said. "Everywhere you look, there's a roadblock. You raise taxes and the legislature says, 'Roll them back.' You can build a really cheap school, but the public is saying no, that's not what they want. They want the nice school with the Wi-Fi."

What the local governments need, he said, is a new revenue source.

"If we don't come in and find another funding source," Nicholas said, "you're going to see more impact fees."

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