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## No easy fix for roads, schools

**The county rejects higher road fees but will consider them for schools.**

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TAVARES

After rejecting huge increases to Lake's road-impact fees, county commissioners expect another fight brewing over whether to boost school-impact fees that are used to help build classrooms.

Commissioners on Tuesday night unanimously voted down a controversial proposal to raise road-impact fee rates between 400 percent and 800 percent for new homes and businesses. County leaders instead will consider creating a task force of residents to come up with alternative ways of paying for new or improved roads needed to keep up with growth.

"We need to look at other solutions," commission Chairman Welton Cadwell told a crowd of about 700 people at one of the county's largest meetings ever.

While commissioners decide whether they want to set up the committee to find other funding, they could also consider hikes to the county's school-impact fees as early as next month.

Although commissioners ultimately set the fee, the School Board must first make its recommendation to county leaders.

School Board members on Monday expect to see a revised study of the rates, which when proposed would have made Lake's school-impact fees the highest in the state -- \$17,513 for most new residential development.

But school officials say the new numbers should be lower and don't anticipate the same aggressive campaign that Lake's builders and business community waged for months against road-impact fee hikes in the face of a steep decline in homebuilding.

Tuesday's vote "will probably help the School Board . . . because I was concerned about the negative backlash from having the [road] impact fees go up," School Board member Scott Strong said.

Still, some in the building industry say they will push hard for a moderate increase -- if any -- in school fees.

Similar to what it did with the county-endorsed road-impact fee study, the Home Builders Association of Lake County plans to scrutinize the School Board's rates and make its own recommendation, said the group's president, Jim Bible.



Meanwhile, the fight over impact fees shows why finding new ways to fund construction such as roads has never been more pressing, planning experts say.

"This impact fee is boom or bust, and we've got to diversify," said T.J. Fish, executive director of the Lake-Sumter Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Those sources could be anything from raising the tax on a gallon of gas from 5 to 10 cents to exploring tolls and user fees, Fish said.

But previous proposals to boost the gas tax haven't been popular with commissioners and aren't a likely option now, some county leaders say.

"It's pretty clear the citizens of all the state of Florida are pretty much up in arms about their taxes and fees," Commissioner Jennifer Hill said. "There's just so many pots you can take from. . ."

Hill, who said she was skeptical of creating another committee to review impact fees but voted for it anyway, said she hoped the task force would be made up of people without a "personal interest" in rates.

Commissioner Elaine Renick, who voted against the task force, said she feared putting off any possible increase for a year or more.

"People want the impact fee to pay for growth," Renick said. "I hope that when we consider the makeup of this task force that we can also discuss putting a minimum increase in place so we're not falling farther and farther behind."

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