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BCC extends school impact fee on new homes



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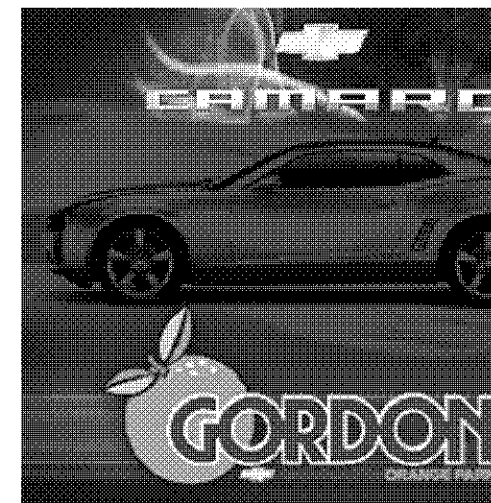
By Stephen Kindland

Staff writer

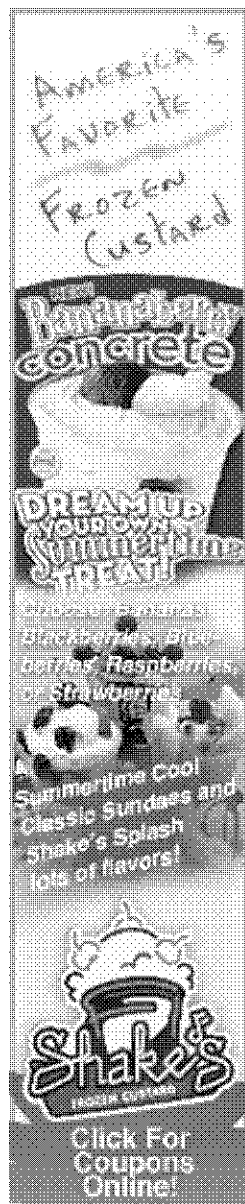
GREEN COVE SPRINGS – County commissioners have voted to keep school impact fees at their current level after listening to Clay County school officials and members of the Clay Builders Council plead their cases.

School Superintendent Ben Wortham reminded each commissioner during a Board of County Commissioners meeting on Tuesday, July 14, that each of them has either taught in the Clay County school system, attended one of its schools or has children who have gone to at least one county school before pointing out that his district is still paying off \$100 million in loans to build 12 new schools during the past 10 years.

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"I'm preaching to the choir," said Wortham, whose district has endured \$20 million in state funding cuts the past two years. "I plead with you – no, I beg you," to keep the impact fees intact.

The fees are placed on new residential development and can only be used for education-related capitol expenditure. They are re-addressed by commissioners every two years, who have the option of raising, lowering or maintaining the fees -- currently set at \$7,034, \$3,236 and \$5,979 for single, multi-family and mobile homes, respectively – based on school construction costs.

Four of the Clay County School Board's five members also attended the meeting, along with Mike Elliott, assistant superintendent for support services. Elliott bolstered Wortham's case by telling commissioners that school impact fees are based on the number of housing units and not student enrollment, which has leveled off in recent years.

"We're still paying off debts," Elliott said. "This has been a rough one and a half years for us."

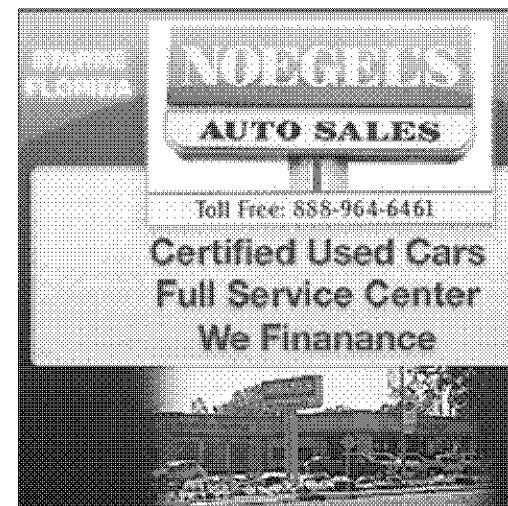
Commissioner Ronnie Robinson, who cast the dissenting vote in a 4-1 decision to maintain the fees at their current level, pressed Elliott for information about school enrollment. When Elliott said that only half the county's schools are at capacity, Robinson said he didn't believe impact fees are the answer to the district's problems.

"We need to get the schools full we have now," Robinson said.

Matt Carlton, president of the Clay Builders Council, asked commissioners to reduce the impact fee rather than eliminate it.

"We're not asking to get rid of it, although we'd love it if you did," Carlton said.

Builder John Cogdill of Orange Park asked commissioners to postpone their decision until the completion of a report that would outline the effects impact fees



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have on a housing industry already hard hit by the recession, but commissioners appeared ready to vote.

Commission chairman Wendell Davis, a licensed Realtor who once coached football and taught at Orange Park High School before teaching at the college level, said he was voting in favor of the fee even though "it's common knowledge I'm not an impact fee person."

Davis said the school board had presented a strong case, and that he trusted the school district to make the right decisions.

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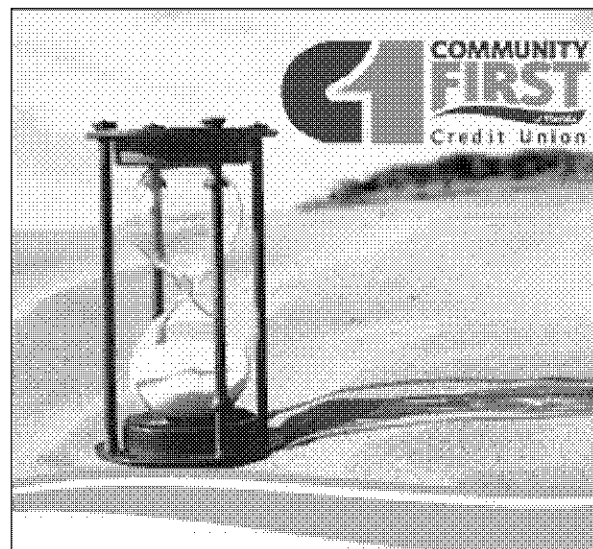
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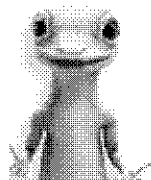
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