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## Battle for impact fees may be over

### Groveland will help pay for high school's expansion; the School Board will drop its suit.

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TAVARES -- The Lake County School Board and Groveland officials agreed Monday to settle months of legal wrangling for more than \$500,000 in city impact fees.

City Council members said they would consider turning over the money to help pay a small part of a nearly \$10 million expansion of South Lake High School in Groveland. In return, School Board members will drop a lawsuit they filed against Groveland in September.

The school project -- to provide room for more than 450 extra students -- will include 14 classrooms, three science labs and several other facilities. Construction is scheduled to begin this summer.

Groveland Mayor James Smith applauded the agreement but said the legal dispute could have been avoided if school-district officials worked better with the city.

"We could have resolved this a lot earlier with more-open communication," Smith said.

The standoff focused on money Groveland has collected for more than a year to help expand or build more schools. The goal is to help ease the area's already overcrowded classrooms and to make sure class space is available to accommodate the city's enormous growth.

Groveland -- with almost 6,000 residents, according to estimates -- is expected to grow by about 5,000 homes in the next five to seven years. Its population is expected to reach 25,000 in 20 years.

That will only worsen problems for the county school district, which already is struggling to keep up with growth in south Lake. Officials say they don't have enough money and simply can't build campuses fast enough.

To help generate more funding for schools, Groveland collects a \$2,000 supplemental education-impact fee charged to each home built in the city. That is separate from the county's \$7,055 school-impact fee

charged to homes built in Lake.

City officials originally wanted to give the impact fees to the School Board. But when a board attorney asked for the money last year, Groveland turned down the request.

City Council members later talked about using the fees to help pay for their own charter school. They are working with Charter Schools USA of Fort Lauderdale to build a campus for up to 1,400 students, from kindergarten through eighth grade.

The charter school, which may cost as much as \$16 million, could open in 2007.

The developer of the proposed 975-home Estates at Cherry Lake community off Cherry Lake Road recently gave Groveland about 20 acres for the facility.

The School Board filed a legal suit against Groveland in September, asking a circuit judge to decide whether the city violated its own ordinance that created the supplemental education-impact fees. Officials also asked the court to order Groveland to turn over the money.

The school suit asks for about \$600,000 that Groveland had collected by the middle of last year. But the city continues to collect its supplemental education fees, which now total more than \$925,000.

In response to the suit, Groveland opted to take advantage of state laws that allow governments to try to settle their differences before seeking court action. Monday's meeting was the first time members of the School Board and the City Council had met face to face to try to resolve their disagreement.

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