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Borrowing will bring classrooms

District to take on debt so schools can be built or expanded

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TAVARES -- The School Board is planning to assume more debt to accelerate the pace of construction and ease extreme crowding at south Lake campuses.

In the next two years, board members intend to build four new campuses, replace three existing schools and expand two others. All but one of the projects lie in south Lake.

The construction boom will add classroom space for nearly 6,000 students, and could be completed by fall 2007. The flurry could put a huge dent in the number of students expected to exceed capacity that year, but still will leave more than 2,000 children stranded in portable classrooms, according to district enrollment projections.

The county's most crowded campus, Lake Hills, which serves severely disabled students, also will receive a new facility this year.

School Board member Jimmy Conner said the district fell behind a year because Superintendent Anna Cowin ordered staff to focus on building a K-8 campus that was ultimately rejected by him and his colleagues. Construction of other schools has finally gotten on track, he said.

"I think we have done everything humanly possible to build as fast as we can with the resources we have," Conner said. "You can't do anything more than what we are doing."

The progress reflects the effort of both board members and Superintendent Anna Cowin.

The board has been pressing to raise as much money as possible without jeopardizing its credit rating.

To fund a new middle school, board members plan to assume a short-term loan secured by the impact fees developers must pay to build homes. The move would raise \$40 million to be repaid over the next five years. The only barrier to the school's construction is the rezoning of the land, which is under

consideration by the County Commission.

The board also intends to boost the amount it borrows against property taxes, raising \$25 million to \$30 million annually.

If board members succeed in persuading county commissioners to increase the impact fee to \$10,775, as originally proposed last year, other construction could be hastened as well.

Cowin and her staff are responsible for coming up with the idea for three smaller high-school projects, alleviating some of the crowding until the district can afford to build the new secondary campus in Minneola.

East Ridge and South Lake high schools will be expanded this year to accommodate a total of about 900 more students.

Cowin also fostered a partnership with Lake-Sumter Community College to build a health-science and technology school on their south Lake campus. South Lake Hospital and the National Training Center also are joining the venture, Cowin said. The campus would serve about 600 students and offer college credit for some of the courses.

Construction is slated to start next year, Cowin said. She attributed much of the tension between her and the board to a difference in philosophy. Board members want to build new campuses as well as renovate and expand older ones. She said she prefers to build only new schools.

"I just want it to happen," Cowin said. "I am getting very impatient with getting student stations built."

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