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## Browbeating misses the point in debate over impact fee

By Times Wire

The push to stimulate the Pasco economy has turned into an embarrassing shove from members of the building community intent on bullying elected school district officials into kowtowing to an impact fee reduction.

In a series of rhetoric-escalating e-mails, Jim Deitch, chief operating officer of Southern Crafted Homes, suggested School Board member Cynthia Armstrong is acting out of financial self interest and the Pasco School District has flawed accounting practices and spends money illegally. The charges came in an e-mail Friday morning addressed to Armstrong and superintendent Heather Fiorentino and copied to other home builders, School Board members, county commissioners and the *Times*.

"If you believe that an elected official is illegally using tax dollars, I would expect that you report it to the proper authorities rather than using it to blackmail anyone. That includes me," Fiorentino responded appropriately.

The accusation against Armstrong, a Realtor, is baseless. Her position in trying to maintain the status quo on school impact fees does not personally benefit her or her husband, Greg Armstrong of Coldwell Banker F.I. Grey & Son Residential, Inc. The false charge is particularly scurrilous since Armstrong has no vote on setting the impact fees, a decision that rests with county commissioners.

The supposed questionable accounting surrounds the budgeting of \$4 million in impact fee money to rebuild a school in Land O'Lakes where the district tore down Sanders Elementary and switched the student body to a new school at Connerton last school year.

It is a ridiculous smokescreen intended to intimidate elected school officials, and the subterfuge diminishes the public debate on a highly controversial topic - whether the commission should halve the impact fee on a single-family home to \$2,400 until the end of 2012. The fee cut, as an economic stimulus, has been a near universal failure in other Florida locales trying to jump-start the construction industry. But that hasn't stopped Commissioner Jack Mariano from pushing the idea in Pasco - and recruiting common-thinking building industry advocates -just six months after trashing it as ineffective because of the surplus of foreclosed homes on the market.

Commissioners already have indicated a willingness to cut the school fee, after reducing their own charges for parks and libraries and expediting a replacement fee for transportation, and a final vote is expected Tuesday. Armstrong, however, has urged opponents to attend a public demonstration against the fee cut Monday and to flood a commission town hall meeting scheduled for that night to discuss the upcoming county government budget.

Apparently builders are allowed to show up in force to commission meetings, but educators are not.

"I would suggest you strike a deal between now and Monday. Because if you show up in force to fight this on Tuesday all gloves are off and we are going line item by line item," Deitch said in an e-mail. "Ms. Fiorentino when I used the word illegal I wasn't being loose with the word. There are serious issues with your accounting."

The unwarranted browbeating distracts from more imperative issues. The proposed ordinance, as posted on the county government website, calls for paying impact fees when a building permit is obtained. That should change. It invites abuse and gives builders the opportunity to hoard less expensive permits obtained in late 2012 instead of charging customers the higher fee in 2013. The commission should make payment due at the time a house is completed and certified for occupancy. That will discourage a mass request for cheaper building permits.

Likewise, the proposed ordinance says the county may reinstitute an escalator clause on the school impact fee to adjust it annually. There should be no wiggle room. Commissioners intent on approving this misguided ordinance should guarantee its

expiration at the end of next year and they should replace it with a new fee that more closely matches the cost of building classrooms caused by growth. To do anything else simply magnifies the commission's irresponsibility.

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