



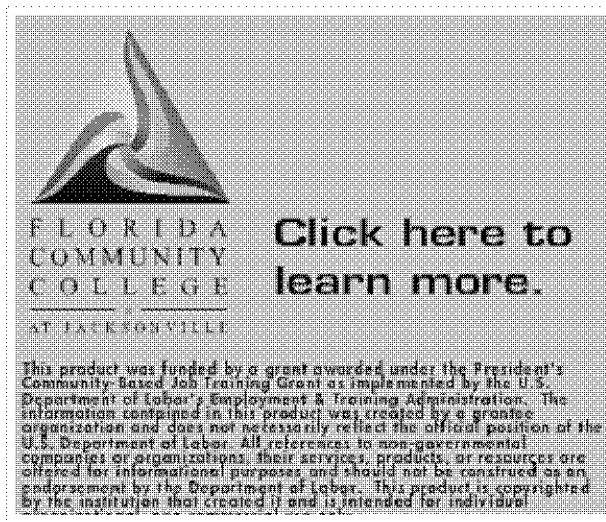
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Clay County Commission spares schools' impact fees

BY BETH REESE CRAVEY | STORY UPDATED AT 8:55 PM ON FRIDAY, JUL. 17, 2009

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In the days leading up to Tuesday's vote on whether to retain controversial educational impact fees, the Clay Commission was being lobbied on two fronts.

On one side were homebuilders, contractors and others connected to the struggling housing industry. Reducir imposed on new residential development could help ease the housing slump, which has put many people out said.

"We're not asking to get rid of it [impact fees], although we would like to," said Matt Carlton, president of the Council. "We're just asking ... be fair with us."

On the other side were School Board members, school district administrators and residents worried about the of a series of state educational funding cuts - and more cuts likely to come in the next year. They asked that t maintained at their current levels.

"How would you like to be remembered?" asked resident Sue Swain. "As a commission who kept their eye on mattered?"

"Get your priorities straight and do the right thing," she said.

After hearing from 15 speakers, most of whom supported maintaining the fees, commissioners gave the scho nod. By a 4-1 vote, they approved an ordinance renewing the fees and maintaining the current amounts: \$7,C family homes, \$3,236 for multi-family units and \$5,979 for mobile homes.

The needs of the cash-strapped school district, which has seen its state funds cut by \$20 million in the last tw continuation of the fees, commissioners said.

CommissionChairman Wendell Davis, a Realtor who supported the suspension of the county's road impact fee earlier this year, voted to maintain the fees. He noted he is teacher.

"I am not an impact fee person," he said, but changed his tune this time in support of the school district. Commissioners Doug Conkey, Travis Cummings and Chereese St Middleburg High School teacher, also voted to maintain the fees.

The sole dissenter was Commissioner Ronnie Robinson. He said he supported schools, but did not see impact fees as "the answer" to their revenue shortfalls.

State law requires impact fees and their justification to be reviewed every two years. A school district consultant said the School Board could legally increase or decrease them the same, primarily based on real estate and school facility costs and available funding. The School Board recommended keeping the status quo, but only the commission impose or change an impact fee.

After the commission vote, Superintendent Ben Wortham and the four board members and district staffers who attended the session said they were relieved and apprecia

School impact fee revenues have slowed due to the housing slump, but the district projects about \$3 million for the coming year. Impact fees can be used for capital projects for new schools and buses, and to pay off growth-related school construction debt.

Enrollment has also slowed because of the economic downturn, temporarily halting the need for new schools. But the impact fee revenues are needed to help pay off \$10 million from the 12 new growth-fueled schools built in the past decade, district officials said.

During the commission meeting, Wortham pleaded for support. He noted that the commission includes parents, grandparents, current and former teachers and former Clay County residents who know the importance of a quality school system to attracting new families and businesses to the county.

"I'm preaching to the choir," he said.

School Board member Frank Farrell read a letter, signed by each of the five board members, that said the state cuts have had a "crippling" impact on district finances, and that impact fees would make things worse. Also, reducing or killing the fees "would not revitalize" the local housing industry because the housing slump is statewide and nationally specific, they said in the letter.

Resident William Smith said impact fees are a way to ease the burden on property taxpayers and ensure new arrivals help pay growth-related expenses.

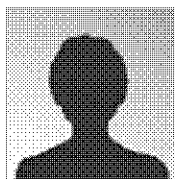
"If the impact fees were to be eliminated," he said, "the cost would be borne entirely by property taxpayers. Is this a fair distribution and allocation of financial resources?"

Builders who want the fee reduced are "asking you to put developers first and schools second," said resident Sandy Goldman. A "short-term fix" for builders could do little to help the school district, she said.

Commissioners said they had enough information.

"There are valid points on each side of the issue," said Commissioner Travis Cummings.

User Comments



Good choice

Submitted by rs471911 on Sat. 7/18/2009 at 12:41 pm

Thank you commissioners (except Robinson) for representing the interests of Clay County citizens. Builders and developers have one thing in mind and that is the well being of citizens.

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