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Commissioners To Discuss School Impact Fee Increase

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By MARK HOLAN The Tampa Tribune

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TAMPA - The long-debated proposal to increase school impact fees appears to be nearing a final vote by Hillsborough County commissioners.

On Wednesday, commissioners will hear about ongoing negotiations between school officials and the Tampa Bay Builders Association to raise the fee on new-home construction. Those talks seem aimed at giving each side something they want: school officials would get their first fee increase in 20 years; builders, a lower fee schedule.

The board's direction on the proposal will set the stage for a scheduled July 25 public hearing and vote. If approved, the increase would take effect Nov. 1.

During preliminary votes in May and June, only a slim majority of four of the seven commissioners supported raising the fee. If one of those majority votes changed, it could kill or delay the proposed increase until next year.

"I will support some impact fee increase," Commissioner Tom Scott said Friday. "I think we should give them enough to meet their needs, but I'm not in favor of raising it through the roof."

Scott was the swing vote in the preliminary votes after initially withholding his approval until the end of the state legislative session.

Commissioners Mark Sharpe, Ken Hagan and Kathy Castor also have backed the fee increase.

Commissioners Ronda Storms and Brian Blair have argued against the increase, saying the school system cannot be trusted with the money. Commission Chairman Jim Norman missed the earlier votes because of heart surgery.

Some of the urgency surrounding the impact fee has decreased over the past few weeks. School officials have backed off estimates of a \$420 million shortfall in the district's five-year building plan because of more-than-expected state revenue and by adding new wings to existing schools instead of building new campuses.

The projected shortfall now is about \$198 million, school officials say.

The school board also has declined to press for a sales tax increase.

"If most of the money for schools is there," Blair said Monday, "why would we raise the fee just to feel good?"

School officials and representatives of the Tampa Bay Builders Association have been meeting about the proposed fee increase for a month, but had not reached a final deal by Monday.

At the center of the discussions is whether to peg the fee increase to the number of bedrooms or to the square footage of the new homes.

Under one proposal, the current \$196 fee on a three-bedroom house would increase to \$1,000 on Nov. 1 and then grow in increments to \$3,880 by May 2008. The fee on a four-bedroom house would be \$1,478 on Nov. 1 and top out at \$5,736 in 2008. A five-bedroom home would be \$2,120 on Nov. 1 and top out at \$8,225 in 2008.

Calculating the fee by square footage might lower the impact fee owed on larger homes. A three-bedroom house typically measures from 2,000 to 2,499 square feet. A 2004 joint study by the school board and county commission on impact fees suggested charging \$1,093 for a house with that square footage.

Builders and school officials, however, have discussed charging \$1,000 for a home of 2,000 to 2,499 square feet regardless of the number of bedrooms, then increasing the fee to \$4,000 by May 2008.

The fee for a home of 2,500 to 2,999 square feet would be \$1,086 on Nov. 1 and \$4,345 by 2008.

The fee for 3,000 to 3,999 square feet would be \$1,191 on Nov. 1 and top out at \$4,764 in 2008.

Representatives of the Tampa Bay Builders Association did not return telephone calls Friday and Monday.

The proposed ordinance includes other features, such as:

- Reimburse some of the impact fee on developments that include at least 20 percent affordable housing.
- Allow the fee to pay for school construction. Currently, the fee only can go toward the purchase of property for school sites.
- Require a review of the impact fees at least once every five years.

Cathy Valdes, the school system's chief facilities officer, said she was confident the commissioners will approve some increase.

"I'm taking the commissioners at their word, that they have already voted to support \$4,000 impact fees," Valdes said.

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