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Committee Puts Off Fee Opinion

Panel will meet with County Commission to discuss charges on new homes in Polk.

By [Rebecca Mahoney](#)

The Ledger

BARTOW -- The Polk County School Board has no direct say in the size of impact fees imposed to help pay for local school construction.

But board members' opinions are proving a complication for the committee asked to recommend a specific figure to the Polk County Commission, which will have to vote on any increase.

On Tuesday, that committee again put off settling on a number.

Instead, committee members spent more than two hours considering a variety of increases, including a consultant's suggested 446 percent jump to \$8,767 for new, single-family homes.

In the end, they decided only to hold another meeting -- this time with the School Board and the County Commission.

"I think it would be premature here to make a decision," said committee Chairman Randy Dodd. "Before we vote, I want to hear what they have to say."

Consultant Randy Young has suggested increasing Polk County's school impact fee of \$1,607 to \$8,767 for single-family homes, citing the cost of complying with the state's new class-size reduction rules.

But at a meeting earlier this month, committee member Bob Williams, the district's supervisor of operations and facilities, said some school officials thought the proposed fee is too steep and that it requires local home construction to bankroll school-building efforts that the Florida Legislature should pay for.

IMPACT FEE QUANDARY

Polk County's Impace Fee Advisory Committee is wrangling with whether and how much to raise the county's impact fee for school construction. Here are some key figures in the debate:

\$1,607: Current school impact fee for single-family home.

\$8,767: New fee that would include money or class-size reduction needs.

\$2,858: New fee excluding class size.

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Faced with Williams' concern, the committee asked Young to recalculate his proposed increase by factoring out the class-size costs.

Young presented the board with the new numbers on Tuesday.

He said that more than 70 percent of the proposed increase stems from paying for class-size reduction.

Without it, the fee for homeowners would drop to \$2,858.

But that could put the county in hot water if lawmakers balk at paying for reduced class sizes.

Young said Tuesday he did not endorse the new fee, but simply was providing information as requested.

The committee is slated to meet with the Board of County Commissioners and the School Board on Aug. 26.

Committee members plan to ask the School Board about such issues as how much money, if any, they expect from state lawmakers. They also may ask School Board members to share their opinions about what they think an appropriate fee would be. But the committee does not plan to vote to recommend a fee at that time.

George Lindsay, committee member and president of the Polk County Home Builders Association, disagreed with asking School Board members for input. He suggested the committee compromise by recommending a fee that would pay for half the class-size amendment. The idea failed to gain enough support from the rest of the committee.

"I don't think we're going to learn anything more," he said about the School Board meeting. "I don't see a consensus from a majority here."

School Board member Jack English has said he thinks the state should pay for the class size reduction effort. He couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday.

Reached after the meeting, board member Brenda Reddout said she's looking forward to the meeting because it will "give the School Board a chance to talk with one voice."

She said Williams' request to ask Young to recalculate the fee caused confusion and sends the wrong message about the School District's priorities.

"I'm looking for documentation from staff on why they think a lower number would be better," she said.

School Board member Margaret Lofton said she plans to push for the committee to vote for the entire 446 percent increase, and said she won't be satisfied if the new fee is less than \$7,000.

"I don't see how any informed citizen in Polk County who has a vital interest in the education of our youth, in providing a world-class education, could in good conscience accept anything less than what the paid consultant suggested the impact fee to be," she said.

"When people begin to barter and gamble with the education of our youth, they are not my friend."

County Commissioners will have the final decision about impact fees.

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