

Concurrency memo has that fishy smell

A Times Editorial

Published October 30, 2007

At first glance, you'd think the Pasco County Attorney's Office didn't like the limited snacks scheduled to be served at a joint School Board/County Commission meeting this morning. Besides the usual coffee and bottled water, it looked like the county legal staff wanted to add red herring to the menu.

The herring - a tactic to divert attention from the real issue at hand - came last week in an poorly conceived memorandum from the County Attorney's Office. Among other things, it accused the school district of purposely undercounting school capacity, which could lead to higher costs to developers or a future building moratorium.

It also suggested the district do a space study to ensure each school is being used to its fullest potential. You don't need a consultant to tell you that. Take a walk around Cypress Elementary, which has more than twice as many students as intended, or visit Land O'Lakes High School. It is nearly 300 students above capacity, even after the opening of nearby Sunlake High School.

The memorandum comes as the county and district work through state-mandated changes to the county's long-term land plan requiring school concurrency - a guarantee that there is enough space for new students attributed to new residential construction. Today, the School Board and County Commission will gather for the third in a series of workshops to spell out exactly how to link new schools and new growth. It is clear there needs to be more work and less shop conducted at these meetings as the February deadline for completion looms.

County Attorney Robert Sumner acknowledged Monday the memorandum he signed was inflammatory and did a poor job of communicating the issue at hand. In essence, he said, the district needs to set higher capacity levels at its schools or else the board and commission need to agree on a higher impact fee.

Without the higher fee, approved homes, which have not been constructed, could contribute less than \$5,000 per single-family home for new schools. Developments approved after the concurrency plan is adopted would be charged more than double that amount to cover their proportionate share of school building expenses.

The double standard could have far-reaching financial consequences for schools, considering the county has 65,000 homes that could be obligated to pay only the smaller impact fee.

Forget jamming elementary schools with 25 percent more students than they are intended to handle or advocating portable classrooms as a satisfactory way to educate children. A more productive topic today will be calculating exactly how much new development should contribute for new schools.

Understandably, it is a sensitive topic for commissioners considering the county's recent machinations over a higher transportation impact fee and the slowdown in the residential building industry. But the alternative is unacceptable.

The district has nearly 600 portable classrooms spread out across the county, with nearly a quarter of them at least 20 years old. Adding more portables or recalculating how to shoehorn more kids into existing classrooms isn't the answer to state concurrency requirements.

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