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County Delays Decision On Impact Fees

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TAMPA - Hillsborough County commissioners inched closer to raising school impact fees Wednesday for the first time in 20 years. But in the end, the board voted 4-3 to postpone the decision until state lawmakers finish their legislative session in Tallahassee this spring.

Commissioners Kathy Castor, Mark Sharpe and Ken Hagan wanted the \$198 impact fee increased to \$1,000 on June 1 and to \$2,000 by the end of the year.

"If we delay, we only delay the inevitable," Sharpe said.

But that's what Commissioners Brian Blair, Jim Norman, Ronda Storms and Tom Scott wanted to do.

Scott's vote was because he co-chaired the joint county-school system task force that explored how to plug the \$400 million shortfall for school construction. The committee of elected officials, planners, builders and parents recommended increasing the impact fee.

"I've found that sometimes if you make a decision too hastily, it comes back to bite you," Scott said, adding he supports a moderate increase.

Impact fees are assessed on new home construction. Developers typically pass on the cost to homebuyers. The money is used to buy land for new schools, although the task force recommended changing county rules so the money also can be used for construction.

Wednesday's vote ended another contentious meeting pitting school board administrators against commissioners who question whether the school district is making the best use of public money.

Dozens of parents and school officials urged commissioners to raise the impact fee.

"Don't play politics with this issue," activist Denise Layne said. "You've got to show the moxie, the backbone."

The Tampa Bay Builders Association endorsed the fee being increased to \$2,000. The developers also urged a broad-based funding solution, such as increasing documentary stamps on the sale of existing homes.

In his motion to increase the fees, Sharpe offered to provide relief from the fees being assessed on housing that is considered more affordable to middle- and lower-income workers, such as teachers and firefighters.

His motion failed to win support.

Storms suggested that passing an impact fee now could work against new state concurrency requirements to link home construction to classroom space. As part of a state pilot program, Hillsborough schools are to have a concurrency plan in place next year, far ahead of the December 2008 deadline for most of Florida.

Norman said the community needs to see how much money state lawmakers appropriated during the legislative session and whether the state's class-size amendment is modified to reduce construction needs.

"We care," Norman said. "We may come at it from a different angle. We are trying to reach a balance at what the state will do, what we will do, what the school board will do."

Superintendent MaryEllen Elia said she was disappointed by the vote but considered it progress.

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