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County officials request for donations irks developers

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BROOKSVILLE -- Impact fees don't do enough to pay for new schools in Hernando County so county commissioners and planning and zoning commissioners have accepted the challenge of asking each large-scale developer for a "voluntary donation." Some developers haven't taken too kindly to the request. Some coined the term "voluntary extortion" to demonstrate their disdain at being asked for money.

"I'm objecting to the donation," said Gloria Williams at last week's planning and zoning meeting. Williams originally requested 60 acres of her land to be rezoned to accommodate 85 single-family homes.

"As long as you have rather high impact fees, I object to the donation."

Yet, a letter by Ken Pritz, schools executive director for facility and support operations, detailed the impact Williams' and other developments will have on the region.

Williams' 85 homes will send at least 28 children into area schools at an overall cost of about \$620,676. Impact fees will not cover the cost of educating children from Williams' subdivision.

"If I may, let me describe something to you," said Planning and Zoning Commissioner Anthony Palmieri to Williams. "Let me explain something to you about this extortion. It will still be a couple hundred thousand dollars that you and I and the public will have to subsidize. Growth never pays for itself. You know that."

Palmieri and Pritz have been leading the charge in talking with developers about providing additional funds for schools. Last week, their efforts were mirrored by some county commissioners at their Wednesday land use meeting.

Commissioner Jeff Stabins asked each developer if they were willing to donate additional dollars.

"A number of developers have been working with the school district," Stabins said. "Has your client been working with Mr. Pritz?"

A representative from Studio 54 Investment Properties responded to Stabins by saying that his development would market only to retirees.

"We have considered this request for a voluntary contribution. We are certainly willing to pay our impact fees," said the Studio 54 Investment Properties representative.

"Obviously, the impact fee ordinance is based on the analysis of impacts. That's the vehicle that should be used to charge the rate for everybody -- not just a voluntary contribution."

Commissioner Chris Kingsley agreed with Stabins. He said there was a significant difference in what will be accessed and what the total impact would be. Some residents attending the land use meeting agreed with the two commissioners.

"We are in serious trouble with the schools," said one of those residents, Irma Townsend. "We can't handle any more students in our schools."

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