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County skeptical of impact fee plea

The County Commission tells the School Board it won't back an increase without a full analysis.

By MELANIE AVE, Times Staff Writer
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TAMPA - From their questions Thursday, it was clear Hillsborough county commissioners remain skeptical the School Board has done everything in its power to address school crowding problems.

And until commissioners are assured of this, they appear unwilling to consider raising school impact fees to build schools.

"There's clearly a great deal of misunderstanding and a great deal of information we have to provide," said School Board Chairwoman Candy Olson, after the hourlong meeting between the two boards. "Listen to the questions: 'We don't think you are spending your money frugally.' "

During the meeting, district officials gave commissioners a report showing what it has done in the past decade to address the enrollment boom and a list of its audits and financial reporting awards.

In the end, the two boards agreed that a 16-member task force of parents, builders and government officials, which began meeting Monday, should address the lingering questions and bring recommendations to ease classroom crowding.

Despite recent flareups between the two bodies over growth and religious school holidays, officials were well mannered during the meeting.

"We've created a framework," commission Chairman Jim Norman said afterward. "We've created this task force and we're going to utilize this task force. We're really trying to get the right answers."

The two boards met to discuss the best way to address a \$364-million deficit in the school district's construction budget expected within five years.

School officials are considering whether to ask voters for a half-cent sales tax to pay for new schools needed because of massive growth and the state's class-size reduction mandate.

The district, the nation's ninth largest with 186,000 students, gains an average of about 5,000 students each year. About one-fourth of Hillsborough's 201 schools are at or above capacity.

The district has urged commissioners to raise the \$196-per-home school impact fee, which has remained unchanged since 1989 and is the lowest of the 24 Florida counties that assess the one-time expense on developers.

During the meeting, Commissioner Ronda Storms asked if administrators have drawn school attendance boundaries to maximize every amount of space countywide. Schools in some areas have plenty of room, while others in growing areas are packed.

If impact fees are raised and school capacity is not maximized, the potential for a lawsuit is ripe, she said.

"The School Board is in charge of where the students go," Storms said. "They are the ones who draw the lines. Some would argue school capacity is artificially created by school boundaries."

Olson said the district is reviewing its school boundaries to make sure each is appropriately drawn. Some are expected to be redrawn.

"Our concern is, we have a little bit of capacity right now," she said. "But in a year or two . . . we may not, or will not unless growth just stops."

One of the problems with school boundaries, said superintendent MaryEllen Elia, is the district's large size. In acreage, Hillsborough is the size of Rhode Island.

Commissioner Mark Sharpe asked if the district was building smaller schools and locating them next to county and city parks, to minimize the amount of land needed. He also asked about year-round schools.

"Are you going to be looking at alternatives other than building?" Sharpe asked.

District officials said they are doing or exploring everything Sharpe mentioned, including a review of a closed Kash n' Karry grocery store for sale for \$8-million.

On impact fees, Commissioner Kathy Castor asked: "Who is opposed currently to addressing this sooner rather than later?"

Storms said Castor's question was premature until the commissioners know the School Board's plan for a half-cent sales tax.

She said if the commissioners raised impact fees now and the board asked voters for a tax increase, "Your

half-cent sales tax will fail. It'll fail out of the gate."

Norman, the commission chairman, said he would like to see information on other districts and how they pay for new schools, including districts that do not have school impact fees. He said all he hears is how low the fee is in Hillsborough but dozens of growing counties have none.

"I just want honesty. I want fairness," he said. "I want an (analysis) of the real data. That's what I'm really expecting."

"We wouldn't present anything to you that wasn't a real number," Elia replied. "Now there may be other questions you have."

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