

LAKE

County's income can't handle growth

Need for schools, roads outstripping taxes, fees

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TAVARES -- Despite having some of the highest impact fees in Central Florida and a 1-cent sales tax to pay for schools, roads and other projects, Lake County faces a significant deficit in funding for critical infrastructure in the coming years.

That's because growth shows no signs of slowing. Between July 1, 2003, and July 1, 2004, Lake County zoomed from the 34th fastest-growing county in the United States to No. 22, according to new census figures. The brisk pace of growth has left a backlog of unfunded projects that run into the millions of dollars.

"The dilemma in Lake and a lot of other growth counties is that you don't bridge the gap immediately," county public works director Jim Stivender said. "It's got to be done over time. You play catch-up. When growth slows you are still in a mode of construction."

Some county officials said there really aren't many options to come up with more money, so they are focusing their attention on lobbying the Legislature for changes in growth-management laws in hopes of slowing growth and ultimately making the deficit more manageable.

From 2000 to 2004, the county added about 50,000 residents and now has more than 260,000 people. County officials predict the population could double by 2030.

In response to the waves of new residents, county officials have created or increased several impact fees in the past few years. There are currently five impact fees for a single-family home: schools, fire, roads, parks and library. Total fees range from \$8,908 to \$10,338. In February, Lake's school-impact fee rose to \$7,055. Officials even considered raising it to more than \$10,000 but decided against it because of legal concerns.

A consultant hired by the School Board has projected it will cost \$620 million to meet the demands of

growth during the next 15 years. However, revenues collected from impact fees are projected to be only \$379 million, resulting in a deficit of \$241 million.

"There are not too many options for us to make up that deficit," School Board Chairman Scott Strong said.

Strong said the school district already has a significant backlog in projects for which the impact fee can't be used. He said that instead of trying to find money to fill the void, school officials are focusing their energies on lobbying for changes in growth-management laws that could slow the pace of growth.

He suggested enacting concurrency requirements such as those in Palm Beach County that require public-school facilities needed for residential developments to be in place either before or concurrent with families moving into their new homes.

"We are not going to come up with the money, so the best thing to do is to address growth," Strong said. "It's going to be easier for us to stop development than to find money we don't have."

County Commissioner Welton Cadwell, president-elect of the Florida Association of Counties, said Strong's approach can be used to address holes in other county needs such as roads or libraries. He also said the county probably didn't raise impact fees as fast as it should have to accommodate growth.

"But even if we did, we still would have had a gap," Cadwell said. "Hopefully, the pace of growth will slow down."

No path to paying for roads

Transportation officials projected in 1999 that new roads would cost \$577 million through 2020. But projected revenue for capital improvements from 2003 to 2020 is \$170 million, resulting in a projected \$407 million shortfall.

T.J. Fish, executive director of the Lake-Sumter Metropolitan Organization, a regional transportation-planning group, said a new long-range transportation plan is being developed that will look toward 2025. He said although the 1999 projections are out of date, the new long-range plan will still have a shortfall between revenues and needs.

"The gap issue is where we look at funding mechanisms that currently aren't being utilized," Fish said.

The county charges a local-option gas tax of 7 cents per gallon, which generated \$6 million for the county last year. Lake's cities also receive revenue from the gas tax.

The county has the option of charging an additional 5 cents per gallon, as Volusia and Polk counties do. Commissioners have discussed that idea, most recently at a March retreat. But it would require approval from four of the five commissioners, something that might be unlikely because of the soaring price of gas and the potential backlash from voters. County officials have estimated that if the tax were implemented, the county's cut would be about \$3.8 million per year.

Portable libraries won't last

Another area where the county has had to play catch-up is in the construction of libraries. People moving to Lake from the North might take libraries for granted and could be startled to check out books from a trailer. But that's what they encounter in Astor and Paisley. Rapid growth has forced the county to set up makeshift libraries in portables, so people don't have to travel too far to check out books.

"I think at the time the branches were opened, the idea was to go ahead and get service out to people at the least cost," said Wendy Breeden, the county library services director. "But the shelf life of modulars is not that great."

To serve Lake's expected 2020 population adequately, libraries will have to increase total space by 80 percent, according to a consultant. Doing so is expected to cost at least \$39 million. Breeden said library impact-fee revenues are bringing in about \$1 million a year, so there will be a gap.

"If growth slows, then obviously your needs would be reduced," Breeden said. "The other possibility is we just may not be able to afford to do some of the projects. We would have to scale it back or increase the timeline. Projects may be delayed."

Growth's bright side

Many longtime residents may bemoan the strains growth has placed on their lives. But for Charles Belton of Fruitland Park, it's the reason he moved to Lake County.

Belton, a truck driver, moved about six years ago from West Virginia. His father and grandfather worked in the coal mines, but in the past few decades, that industry has been fading, which has depressed the economy.

"What would happen to Florida if Disney World went out?" asked Belton, 41, as he stood in front of the Eustis Village Shopping Center, which opened in 2002 on U.S. Highway 441. "That's what happened in West Virginia."

Belton worked for the same trucking company in West Virginia, but he would often be told to stay home because there was no freight to transport that day. With all the growth in Florida, he doesn't see that ever happening now.

"I have to beg them to try and get off," he said.

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