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Debate rages over school impact fees

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BROOKSVILLE - Say it's hurricane season.

Meteorologists forecast that the latest storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico could affect Hernando County.

Residents countywide choose to go to one of the county's nine shelters. Should those residents still go to a hurricane-safe location if they don't pay the impact fees to support that shelter?

One school board member posed a similar question during last week's school board meeting.

Sandra Nicholson voiced her frustration after hearing that residents of senior living communities say they shouldn't have to pay school impact fees because they don't impact schools.

Not so, Nicholson said.

"We don't stop them at the door and say, 'Oh, did you pay impact fees?'" Nicholson said during the Feb. 21 board meeting. "Do you live in a 55-and-up community? Does your 55-and-up community have their own shelter?"

There are no "55 and up" hurricane shelters in Hernando County. Nicholson knows that. She believes the state's system of providing shelters through the use of school facilities is an effective one. However, little thought actually goes into what is needed for facility upkeep during hurricane season.

"Everyone thinks that FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) rushes in or someone rushes in to take care of all these people that we house," Nicholson said. "(In) reality our staff has to provide that service."

Nicholson's concerns about residents paying impact fees were raised before the school board voted on plans for the new school being built, currently called, Elementary School J.

That school, and others, must be "designed in compliance with large missile impact," Nicholson and board chair Jim Malcolm said. The extra cost to school officials begins in the million-dollar range.

"This is a prime example of where the impact for money goes and why we need impact fee money," Nicholson said. "Supposedly, there's enough money provided to us from the state to cover this … but it never covers everything."

Those financial areas not covered, however, cannot be left up to communities that do not house school age children, said one county official. According to law, if those communities do not create school impact, they don't have to pay impact fees. Only one

community falls in that category, said Paul Wieczorek, concurrency coordinator with the county's planning department.

According to Wieczorek, The Cascades, a retirement community planned for Brooksville, is the only development that has filed legal paperwork to restrict residents of a certain age.

When asked if The Cascades' residents would still be able to take shelter in area schools during hurricane season, Wieczorek said that using shelters is different.

"That's not a part of the formula of school impact fees," Wieczorek said. "That's a peripheral use."

Wieczorek explained that sometimes schools' basketball courts and other sites are also rented out for different uses. Those are also peripheral uses, he said. To Wieczorek's knowledge, The Cascades is the only retirement community that will be exempt from having to pay school impact fees. Other deed-restricted communities like Timber Pines, Brookridge and High Point have had to pay school impact fees at one time.

According to Wieczorek, those three communities were not age-restricted when they were originally built. Timber Pines, he said, had the option to seek similar legal paperwork as The Cascades but did not choose that option.

The Cascades will consist of 1,000 homes, according to county and city officials. As for whether The Cascades will "impact" the schools by using the shelters, Nicholson has her own beliefs.

"Everyone impacts the schools," she said last week. "That's the way the state of Florida runs their hurricane shelters and it runs very well. Unless everyone pays a little bit … some are going to have to pay a lot more."

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