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## School Board approves school impact fee ordinance

DESOTO COUNTY -- The DeSoto County School Board on Tuesday passed its own "necessary evil," unanimously approving impact fees on new residential development.

"It's not an easy decision, but I'm absolutely for these impact fees," School Board member Ronny Allen said at a public hearing after the regular School Board meeting last week. He added that he felt the fees were a "necessary evil" to keep current county residents from bearing the full brunt of expected development.

The DeSoto County School Impact Fee Ordinance, as it is officially called, now goes to the county for approval. If it passes muster after a county public hearing March 28, an interlocal agreement with the city and the county will be drawn up. The ordinance would take effect May 1.

The proposed school impact fee would pay for some or all of the cost of building public schools or acquiring facilities to accommodate new development in the county.

The ordinance states that "based on forecasts in the DeSoto County Comprehensive Plan and 'School Impact Fees: DeSoto County, Florida,' new growth and development in the county is expected to continue into the foreseeable future, placing ever-increasing demands on public education facility needs."

The ordinance is designed to comply with the county's comprehensive plan.

It also states that revenue generated from new growth and other sources is not expected to generate sufficient funds to pay for expansion. The adoption of an equitable impact fee system ensures that new development pays a fair share of the costs, the ordinance states.

School Board members emphasized this last point.

"I think this is a fair fee schedule," Chairman Rodney Hollingsworth said. He noted that if growth is coming to DeSoto County, "then growth should pay for it."

Under the proposed impact fee schedule, residents building new houses will be expected to pay 75 percent of the total impact fee, which is based on square footage. The rate could be increased in future years.

These fees must be paid before a building or mobile home permit would be issued.

The schedule shows that 900-square-foot and smaller homes will not pay any school impact fees. A 1,000-square-foot residence will be assessed a \$577 fee toward the elementary school portion of the fee but nothing for the high school portion. The builder would pay 75 percent, or \$433.

A 2,000-square-foot residence will be assessed \$4,809 for the elementary school fee and \$4,316 for the high school fee, for a total of \$9,125. The builder would pay \$6,844. The highest rate listed on the schedule was for a \$2,800-square-foot residence, with a \$13,577 impact fee. The 75 percent payment would be \$10,183.

The fees would be deposited to the newly created school impact fee fund, which will be an interest-bearing account. The county administrator or designee, along with the School Board, would be responsible for authorizing and collecting the fees.

School Board member Lenora Brewer said "new residences only will be affected" by this fee schedule. She said it would not hurt young families or new families moving into the county who are buying a house that is already built.

Brewer, who serves on the county's Planning and Zoning Board, was adamant that these fees were needed because "we will need these (school) facilities."

Board member William Stanko said he has watched other school districts over the years fail to deal with growth issues in a timely manner for building new schools and was positive about the need for DeSoto to face the problem head on.

Even if the board didn't implement impact fees now, "we'd have to do it eventually," Stanko said.

Board member Karen Chancey backed up Stanko's statement, saying, "I think now is the time for it."

The school impact fees would be used strictly for new school buildings and wouldn't exceed the amount needed to construct them.

The proposed ordinance states that school impact fees will not be collected from any development for more than the actual amount required to offset new demands for

public education facilities. Money from the fees will not be joined with money from any other impact fees or used for anything other than new schools. The fees won't be used to replace or renovate existing schools.


Exemptions from the fees would be determined by the county and would include: Reconstruction, expansion or replacement of an existing residential unit; replacement of a destroyed nonresidential building or structure; construction of an accessory structure related to a residential unit; impact fees previously paid; and impact-generating land development by federal, state, county or municipal government and the School Board.

The ordinance would require that every five years, the county and city governments, along with the school board, recommend any changes that should be made to the school impact fee schedule or the ordinance itself.

*You can e-mail Laura A. Schmid at [lschmid@sun-herald.com](mailto:lschmid@sun-herald.com).*

**By LAURA A. SCHMID**

DESOTO NEWS EDITOR

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