

Divided Hernando School Board rejects money for impact fee study

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The prospect of any money rolling into the Hernando County school system from impact fees may have been a long way off before Tuesday night's School Board meeting.

It certainly didn't get any closer during the meeting.

School Board members split 2-2 on two separate measures that would have provided up to \$60,000 to pay for an educational facilities impact fee study, which is required to determine the proper level for school impact fees.

Half of the money, up to \$30,000, would have come from the Hernando County Commission.

"From my position as superintendent of schools, I've been directed not to move forward with either one of these," said superintendent Bryan Blavatt.

The vote came as somewhat of a surprise.

As late as October, a majority of School Board members had expressed their support for resuming the collection of impact fees on new construction to help offset the costs associated with future growth of the district. But that was before Gus Guadagnino replaced retiring James Yant on the School Board.

School Board member Cynthia Moore was ill and absent from Tuesday's meeting. Previously, she had supported reinstating impact fees.

The district will come back to board members in January with a more specific cost of the impact fee study, said facilities director Bo Bavota. It was unclear whether the county's offer to pay half the cost is still on the table.

Impact fees in Hernando County — separate fees exist for such things as parks, roads and public buildings, in addition to schools — have been suspended or discounted for the past three years in an effort to kick-start a stagnant building industry.

The school system estimates it has lost roughly \$1 million in revenue over that period.

The district had pushed county commissioners to lift the moratorium in a joint meeting in October, but was unable to persuade them. Commissioners voted later to extend the moratorium for 90 days, at which time they also reached the agreement with school officials concerning the study.

Board Chairman Matt Foreman and Guadagnino both voted against the measures to pay for the study, which is expected to cost an estimated \$40,000 to \$60,000 and take six to nine months to complete.

Foreman says paying for the study, at this point, is a risk because there is no guarantee commissioners will vote to lift the moratorium.

"I view the money that we put into this study as a gamble," he said. "The (commissioners) that are there, for the most part, have repeatedly voted against impact fees. They have repeatedly gone to zero. They've extended zero."

He said all board members should ask themselves: "Are we okay putting up 30 grand of our own money and maybe getting squat in return?"

Guadagnino had a similar opinion.

"I can't see us putting a dime into the study that they might not even accept," he said.

Despite that, he seemed to support impact fees.

The idea behind reducing the fees was to promote more development, he said.

"There's really nothing that I've seen that really showed that that's actually what took place," he said. "There's nothing that says, because we did this, our real estate spiked.

"I have nothing to believe that taking impact fees away was the right thing to do, but we took the hit of it."

The board's decision left some confused.

"I just want to say, I don't know what happened here a few minutes ago," said board member Dianne Bonfield. "As a board member, we need to do this study. We need to do this. It's like saying, where's the money going to come from for us to build schools? Well, I guess it's going to come from the taxpayers that have lived in Hernando County year after year who have been here through thick and thin."

She said people who move here "are going to be absent from helping us build the schools that are going to educate their children.

"I really don't know what happened here, but I'm sorry. I tried."

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