

Fee cut's effect on Pasco schools

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NEW PORT RICHEY - The financial lifeline offered to Pasco County homebuilders could mean money problems for the already cash-strapped Pasco County School District.

Tuesday, county commissioners agreed to massive cuts in the impact fees developers pay when they complete a new home. The impact fees connect the new houses to roads and sewers.

But the fees also help build new schools necessitated by residential growth. Home builders say without a cut in Pasco's impact fees, some as high as \$16,900 per house, few of those left in the industry will survive.

"What we want to see is these people get back to work," Jim Deitch, a home builder, told commissioners Tuesday as he pointed to hearing room filled with construction workers.

"If the County Commission goes in that direction it just tells us we have to," said Steve Luikart, a member of the Pasco County School Board. "It's a not a choice you fight for what you can get."

The fight starts in two weeks when school board members meet with county commissioners. Some school board members say they are concerned with the project impact fee cuts given a projected \$60-million deficit for next year.

Developers complain however that Pasco County charges some of the highest impact fees in the state. Meanwhile, 21 other counties have cut or suspended their impact fees.

"Cutting the fees, even to school, is a mater of the industry's life or death," Deitch said. "The proposal that we find acceptable is a 44 percent [cut] of the current transportation fee; 50-percent reduction in the education and zero everything else out."

If the reduction in impact fees has the desired affect and spurs residential growth educators say that will inevitably mean more students in the district which, in turn, creates a whole new set of problems. Districts that exceed the acceptable number of students per class face fines.

"That would just make the deficit worse if we did have to face those penalties," Armstrong said. Educators say they understand the challenges facing the construction industry."

"We're sitting here with a 35-percent unemployment rate for these folks. We've got to do something to help that out," Luikart added.

The challenge of helping home builders while not hurting education starts on March 8 when the two boards meet.

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