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Hernando County's vote on impact fees takes school district by surprise

By Tony Marrero, Times Staff Writer

The district wants the county to delay a vote set for Tuesday.

BROOKSVILLE - The Hernando School Board will decide Tuesday how to weigh in on the County Commission's decision to make a deeper cut in impact fees.

Problem is, the board will be about four hours too late.

The commission is slated to take a formal vote on the issue at 9:45 a.m. Tuesday. The School Board's workshop is set to begin at 1:30 p.m.

At a Nov. 1 workshop, commissioners reached a consensus to roll back fees to 1999 levels and drop the fee for remodeling nonresidential buildings that are more than 5 years old.

The lower impact fees would take effect at the end of this month and remain in place for one year.

The School Board had a joint meeting with the County Commission that same day to discuss the redistricting process. The impact fees were not placed on that agenda, and the School Board did not have another meeting scheduled until Nov. 15.

"We weren't informed ahead of time that the county was going to take this up until they did," said J. Lisle Bozeman, the district's manager of growth planning and management. "I think we assumed that it would sunset and we would meet and discuss what approach to take."

Impact fees are a one-time levy on new construction to offset some of the costs of expanding infrastructure, such as roads, parks and schools.

District officials sent an email to the county asking for the formal vote to be postponed.

"The reduction of fees will have a significant impact on our current budget," facilities director Bo Bavota wrote.

But the county is under its own time limit because of a sunset provision built into the current fee structure.

In 2009, commissioners tried to jump-start the stalled construction industry by dropping fees to 2001 levels.

That lowered the impact fee for a single-family residence from about \$9,200 to \$4,900. In 2010, the commission agreed to continue the reduction for another year, with a sunset provision to take effect Nov. 28, 2011.

At 1999 levels, the fee would be \$2,948. That could cost the district \$150,000 in this budget year alone, according to a memo from Bozeman to the School Board. Since the district's fiscal year starts July 1, the cut will affect next year's budget, too.

That doesn't sound like much but the move would inhibit the district's ability to stash away dollars for new construction, Bozeman said. It will be years before the district has to build a new school, but impact fees can also be used for expansion projects that add capacity at existing schools.

"Every dollar does count," she said.

Bozeman noted in her memo that county staffers have said lower fees did not appear to act as a stimulant to construction. Superintendent Bryan Blavatt noted studies done nationally that point to the same conclusion.

"The last thing in the world you want to do is take money away from the schools," Blavatt said. "We're already hurting."

Even though it may be too late for this year, the board will still have the discussion on how to approach impact fees in future years, Bozeman said. One approach would be to separate school fees to allow for a different rate.

The School Board in 2009 gave its blessing to reduce the fees. But that was with just three members present at a workshop, and now there are two new board members.

Chairman James Yant gave a hesitant approval then.

After two years of brutal budget cuts, Yant said he would prefer the county bring fees back to 2009 levels.

"I wouldn't say that if we had a lot of people coming and it would encourage them to build," he said.

Commission Chairman James Adkins said the reduction of fees to 1999 levels is necessary.

"We need to do what we can to show businesses that want to develop in Hernando County we're going to do our part to help you," Adkins said.

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