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Impact fees still under review

By Jeff Schmucker

School board members are putting their previous agitation over county commissioners' decision to suspend impact fee collections last year aside in hopes they can see eye-to-eye on bringing the fees back.

School board members and county commissioners will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday at the Hernando County government center to discuss their plans and concerns about again implementing impact fees.

Last year commissioners opted to set impact fee rates at zero. That moratorium is slated to expire on Nov. 15.

An impact fee is a one-time charge on new development to help pay for county roads, parks and other infrastructure.

However, the funds also can be used for other purposes. For example, county commissioners pointed out last month that money garnered from the fees can be used for new books, computers and other equipment for libraries.

County commissioners are considering charging impact fees for parks, libraries, public buildings, law, fire and emergency services, since studies on those fee settings have been completed.

Updated studies have not been completed for schools and roads, however, and county staff members are asking commissioners for direction on whether to establish an impact fee rate for those or suspend collecting monies until a study is completed.

Staff members for the school district and county expect those studies to take six to nine months to complete at a cost of between \$60,000 and \$70,000.

If county commissioners vote to bring back impact fees during their Nov. 13 meeting, staff members report that they will need a 90-day period to advertise the new fee rates.

School board members have expressed interest in having impact fees set to 2007 levels until the new study is complete. Commissioners would then review whether the fees should be increased or decreased depending on the study's outcome.

However, county staff has recommended commissioners not set an impact fee rate for schools until the study is complete. County Commissioner Dave Russell previously said that the point of the impact fee studies is to help ensure that impact fee rates are defensible if there is a court challenge.

Last November, school board members were taken aback by county commissioners' decision to suspend all impact fees. Initially, commissioners were looking to lower impact fees across the board to 1999 levels rather than the 2001 levels they had set a year prior.

Commissioners argued during that time they needed to do more to bolster the economy and were met with applause from a crowd of builders and Greater Hernando County Chamber of Commerce members in the audience.

That same day, school board members said they were not properly notified about the county's intentions or invited to attend meetings and wondered if they were left intentionally out of the loop.