

Investment requires more than delay ploys

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To appease a special interest, some Hernando commissioners are poised to empty the county's contingency budget just 45 days into the fiscal year. It's a bad idea aimed at propping up an even worse one — extending the county's moratorium on school impact fees.

Last week Commission Chairman Wayne Dukes — looking to curry favor with home builders — sought to delay restoration of the Hernando School Board's impact fee by promising to pay for a new study on the fee. The \$4,266 fee charged on any new single-family home was suspended for a year in a failed effort to rejuvenate the home building industry. But Dukes' generosity could wipe out what remains of the county's contingency fund: less than \$66,000.

Here's why: In 2007, the school district paid \$64,000 for its last impact fee study. Three years later, the same consultant billed Lake County more than \$90,000 for a study and public presentations. Meanwhile, the county's general fund contingency sits at just \$65,806 because commissioners already committed \$245,000 from that account to pay for new employees at Animal Services.

Dukes' benevolence isn't intended to appease the school district. It could find \$65,000 from its own contingency accounts. Rather he's trying to buy time. Dukes' offer, if approved by a commission majority, allows the county to delay implementation of a school impact fee as it considers what to do about its year-long moratorium on all impact fees that is expiring.

County staff has proposed restoring fees of less than \$1,400 per home for public safety, parks, libraries and other needs. Still undetermined are fees for the most expensive items — transportation and education — that previously cost a combined \$7,893 per single-family house. The study to set the transportation fee is not yet finished. But the school district wants the moratorium lifted so it can again collect its \$4,266 fee until a new study can be completed.

Meanwhile, the building industry has lobbied for an extension of the moratorium for at least another year. It is an unreasonable and unjustifiable request that would continue to shift the cost of future infrastructure onto current property taxpayers, a significant number of whom paid the impact fees when purchasing newly built homes last decade.

The finger-in-the-dike governing must end. Hernando County should start planning for its future and that must include fair charges to offset the impact future growth will have on government services. Since 2009, the county and school district have forfeited more than \$1 million in capital construction money because of reduced or waived impact fees that turned out to be nothing more than a failed economic stimulus for the residential building industry.

At a minimum, a commission majority should follow the thinking of two lame-duck brethren, Jeff Stabins and John Druzbeck, who indicated a willingness to let the school district retain roughly 50 percent of its fee until its new study can be completed.

"We've let all our facilities go to hell. It would be nice to invest in the future of the county," said Stabins who leaves office next week after declining to seek re-election.

Indeed. And that investment requires more than a \$65,000 ploy to buy another impact-fee-free year for the builders.

