

## Lee student enrollment rising again, more school construction planned

By TARA E. McLAUGHLIN

Sunday, December 5, 2010

BONITA SPRINGS — A surprise sign that the recession's grasp has loosened may be evidenced in Lee County's classrooms.

The Lee County School District is on its way to seeing two years of student population growth and once again considering building new schools and buying land.

Its five-year capital improvement plan calls for at least two new elementary schools, a middle school and additions at middle schools as well as a plan to buy land in the southern part of the county.

Interim Superintendent Lawrence Tihen told Lee County commissioners last month that although many believe the county's school population is shrinking, the opposite is true.

"That perception from two years ago still remains," said Joe Donzelli, the school district spokesman. "People were leaving this area in a mass exodus. ... Just because the situation hasn't improved as fast as people had hoped, that does not translate (to declining enrollment)."

Lee's numbers skyrocketed in the early 2000s as the construction industry took off. Each year saw thousands of new students. In the 2000-01 school year, about 58,000 students attended class in the district. Now, more than 80,000 are enrolled.

Most of that growth came in the years leading up to the 2006-07 school year when the district's population was growing by 5 percent to 7 percent a year.

But traffic slowed when the hammers and nails disappeared.

The following two years were essentially stagnant with just a few dozen new students arriving.

But in fall 2009, about 1,700 new students enrolled in one of the district's more than 80 schools. This year, the numbers look even higher, based on a November report.

The capital improvement plan calls for another 3,300 seats in the next five years.

The news was practically unbelievable to Michael Reitmann, executive vice president of the Lee Building Industry Association.

The organization of builders and developers keeps a watch on school enrollment because those figures are justification of school impact fees charged for each living unit built.

"I was almost flabbergasted because obviously my perception was totally different than what I read in their proposal," Reitmann said of the capital improvement plan. "My perception, I haven't researched it, was that enrollment had been declining."

He said one of his first thoughts was that the numbers were being used to justify keeping fees high. He's watched construction worker after construction worker leave town with their children in the housing bust.

Reitmann said he would like to see a study done to prove the current fees, which are used to pay for school construction, and the need for more schools.

"Impact fees have to have a rational nexus," he said, contending Lee County's school impact fee and administrative cost of about \$4,200 per living unit "are a tremendous burden."

Impact fees collected for the Lee school district nearly doubled during the 2009-10 school year, jumping to \$4.7 million from \$2.6 million the year before. And the school is budgeting for \$4 million annually through the next five years.

While Lee commissioners are considering how to limit impact fees to spur growth, Mary Gibbs, community development director, said school impact fees aren't on the radar for cuts. The board is more focused on road impact fees paid for by commercial construction projects.

While it may be hard to believe, the trend in classrooms can be seen in other counties, including Collier, whose population saw a fractional increase after three years of slight declines.

The 2009-10 school year saw about 0.4 percent growth, or 200 new students. This year, another 150 enrolled compared with last November.

Statewide, the story is the same, though less pronounced. The Florida Department of Education last year showed a slight increase, 0.2 percent, or 5,600 students, after three years of declines, according to a comparison of 10 years of enrollment.

While acknowledging its supposition, Donzelli said a few factors are probably playing into the much-welcomed data.

"The cost of living is a little cheaper," he said. "And, lest we forget, the (chambers of commerce) will tell you, sun sells."

The schools' population increases are mirroring a trend in the overall state population.

During the boom times, some 400,000 people moved to Florida every year. That's like adding a city the size of Miami to the state annually, said Amy Baker, the Florida Legislature's chief economist. Growth slowed and then, from April 1, 2008, through April 1, 2009, the state lost population for the first time since the state has been tracking demographics.

Baker said the majority of those who left were working families.

"That would have hit the school enrollment a little harder," she said.

Demographic estimates for this year expect a slight increase, up 0.12 percent, or about 22,000 people. And numbers are expected to climb back to six-digit growth in 2012.

That kind of growth puts pressure back on schools to make way for kids in their classrooms.

And while about a third of Lee's growth came at charter schools, which aren't built by the district, the growth at county-built schools is enough to spark interest in kick-starting construction and land purchases, which the district hasn't seen in years.

For a time, the county was building schools as fast as possible to meet the needs of its booming population, Donzelli said.

Between 2003 and 2008, the county spent \$125 million on about 1,300 acres, according to land purchase data. An elementary school needs 15 acres, a middle school needs 20 and a high school requires 40 acres.

Since then, more than a dozen schools were built, including Oak Hammock Middle School and South Fort Myers High School.

A couple of schools were even built in old K-mart buildings.

And the district has been banking land in advance of what demographic data suggests.

"One thing people don't make any more of is land," Donzelli said.

The district still has almost 900 acres of vacant land, though Tihen's letter to commissioners indicated that not enough was in stock for growth expected in the southern part of the school district.

While tax and impact fee revenue has slowed as property values and construction took their hits, the district isn't planning on major construction until the 2012 and 2013 school years, the plan's budget showed.

Still, the numbers have been a bright spot for the district as enrollment is a key indicator for school districts, not the least of which is that it affects the budget. Districts tell the state how many students they believe they are going to have and the state sends back tax dollars based on those estimates. They have to pay the state back if those numbers aren't borne out.

"Everything we do is based on student enrollment," Donzelli said.

\_\_\_ *Connect with Tara E. McLaughlin at [www.naplesnews.com/staff/tara-mclaughlin/](http://www.naplesnews.com/staff/tara-mclaughlin/)*



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