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## Parents: Crowding 101 is in session

**Here's where school district leaders stand on taxes, impact fees, boundaries and "concurrency."**

MICHAEL VAN SICKLER and MELANIE AVE

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School crowding can be a confusing issue for parents who worry that their children may not be getting the attention they need from overworked teachers.

And with Hillsborough County School District officials saying the problem is so severe that it will cost \$1.2-billion in the next five years to build and repair the needed classroom space, this could become a pocketbook issue. School Board members have said that either a sales tax or a higher impact fee may be needed to overcome a \$364-million deficit.

They are also considering redrawing attendance boundaries, adding portable buildings to some campuses and increasing magnet programs in some roomy urban schools.

As superintendent MaryEllen Elia continues her tour of area schools to talk with parents about the state of Hillsborough's primary education, it might be helpful for parents to know more about an issue that's only going to grow in importance.

Here's a recap of what the St. Petersburg Times has reported.

This summer, school officials said they were considering asking voters to approve a half-cent sales tax that would raise \$80-million a year.

An infusion of cash was needed, they said, to keep up with an unprecedented suburban housing boom that has stretched the School Board's finances beyond its ability to build schools to keep pace. In the past 20 years, enrollment in Hillsborough has grown by about 80,000 children, to 192,000, making this the nation's ninth-largest school district.

Another method to pay for schools, an impact fee imposed on new homes, has mostly been ignored by

School Board members.

While other counties have raised their impact fees to pay for schools in recent months, Hillsborough's has remained at \$196 a home, the lowest in Florida.

Orange County, for instance, raised its rate to \$7,000 for each new single-family home. That would have raised \$80-million in Hillsborough last year.

So why doesn't the School Board consider impact fees?

Jim Hamilton, the school district chief of staff, said in August that impact fees don't raise enough money to build and repair all the schools that are needed - even though impact fees the size of Orange County's would raise as much as the sales tax that he favors.

Hamilton also said the School Board wants "a growing community" and doesn't want to raise impact fees that might discourage developers from building more homes.

Since the Times reported the School Board's leanings for a sales tax in August, board members have said they want the County Commission to consider impact fees after all. Still, they have yet to explicitly ask commissioners to raise the fees. Without such a request, higher impact fees are unlikely.

Lobbying commissioners for an increase would test intimate ties the School Board has with the building industry, which has long opposed impact fees.

The spouses of two board members, chairwoman Candy Olson and Carolyn Brickleyer, are partners in law firms that have clients in the building industry. John Olson is a lawyer with Stearns, Weaver, Miller, a firm that represents many large developers in Hillsborough. Keith Brickleyer founded Brickleyer, Smolker & Bolves, another firm popular with local developers.

The firms fought measures in Broward and Orange counties that attempted to slow home construction in areas without enough schools.

Stearns, Weaver, Miller opposed Broward's attempt in the 1990s to require adequate schools before housing could be approved. In 2001, a judge sided with the firm in striking down Broward's restriction.

Brickleyer, Smolker & Bolves opposed Orange County's attempt to deny rezonings because of congested classrooms. Orange County won that fight in 2002.

School Board members Olson and Brickleyer have said their husbands don't influence the decisions they make, or don't make, on the board.

Still, not only has the School Board not pursued a similar strategy to combat school crowding, but school officials made clear they didn't support the county's attempt to use a similar method to Orange County's late

last month.

When county planners recommended that commissioners deny four projects - two of which were represented by Keith Brickleyer's law firm - superintendent Elia said such a move was "premature."

Elia said the county should wait until another method to control growth, which is called "concurrency," is adopted. Hillsborough is among six Florida school districts that will serve as a testing ground for the state's new concurrency law. The law might give governments the ability to deny developments where schools are too full.

Their plans will serve as models for other districts, which must begin implementing the law by 2008.

But county planners argue that it will be two years before the county actually uses concurrency, and that their effort to delay projects now can be used in the meantime.

County Attorney Renee Lee said Hillsborough couldn't stop development until it adopted an ordinance - and it got the support of Elia and the School Board.

"It's very important that the School Board be a partner in this," Lee said Monday. "We are totally dependent on them. Right now, we don't have a School Board ready to testify about capacity."

So the ball is back in the school district's court.

## **If you go**

Here's a schedule for the remaining six of Elia's seven town hall meetings, all at 7 p.m.

Oct. 18: Armwood High School, 12000 U.S. 92 in Seffner.

Oct. 26: Shields Middle School, 3908 19th Ave. in Ruskin.

Nov. 2: Jefferson High School, 4401 Cypress St. in Tampa.

Nov. 15: Pierce Middle School, 5511 N Hesperides Ave. in Tampa.

Nov. 21: Plant City High School, One Raider Place in Plant City.

Dec. 1: Erwin Technical Center, 2010 E Hillsborough Ave. in Tampa.

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