

Free Six-Sigma Toolkit

ITBusinessEdge.com



Free Six-Sigma Overview & Toolkit

Get it Now! ▶

Ads by Google

St. Petersburg Times tampabay.com

March 8, 2011

Pasco School Board wary of impact fee cuts

By Jeffrey S. Solocheck, Times Staff Writer

School Board members balance students vs. jobs.

LAND O'LAKES - A proposal to slash education impact fees on new home construction is creating tension between two of Pasco County's largest employee bases:

Home builders. And the school system.

"We just want to get back up to being competitive and putting people to work," Mike Ryan, broker-owner of Samuelson Builders Realty, told School Board member Cynthia Armstrong on Tuesday after a meeting.

"I certainly understand the position of the builders. I know we're talking about builder jobs," Armstrong replied. "But you also have to consider teacher jobs."

School Board members do not oppose cutting the fees, but they want to ensure the cuts don't go too deep.

Armstrong noted that education impact fees generate about \$4 million annually that help pay off the district's bond debt incurred by the construction of new schools to handle growth, including Fivay High and John Long Middle.

If there aren't enough impact fee dollars to cover those debt payments, she said, the district must siphon money away from the general revenue fund, the source of employee pay and benefits, among other things.

With the district already facing operating budget cuts up to \$60 million, board members say they can ill afford losing any more money.

Ryan, who ran unsuccessfully for School Board in 2010, said he understands that concern. That's why he has pressed his construction colleagues not to clamor for complete elimination of the \$4,800-per-new-home education impact fee, just a reduction of it.

"There are people who wanted to suspend them altogether," he said. "We didn't support that."

Now it's up to School Board members to try to persuade the County Commission not to go too far. Commissioners set the impact fees on new construction and have already agreed to slash fees in other categories, such as roads, parks and libraries.

"The County Commission can do anything it wants to do. We already know that," School Board member Steve Luikart said. "We all want a better community. Hopefully, we can work together to get that."

The School Board held a special session on Tuesday to prepare for its inevitable meeting with commissioners to talk impact fees. For the most part, they told staff to gather plenty of facts and figures to bolster their case that any fee reduction be measured against potential costs to the district, the county's largest employer.

Among other things, they asked for:

• The total amount of money the county collected in impact fees since inception.

• The balances remaining in each impact fee fund.

• A list of approved developments, including type and number of residences approved, the number already built, and the phases and build-out dates for each.

Armed with the information, the board figured it could make a more convincing case for a limited reduction. Members called a workshop on impact fees for 1:30 p.m. March 21, in advance of a joint meeting with the commission.

They stressed that they do not oppose cutting impact fees.

"I understand the bigger picture in the county," School Board member Alison Crumbley said. "People in construction have suffered."

But they also made clear that they have other interests, too, primarily maintaining district finances so they don't harm programs or employees. United School Employees of Pasco president Lynne Webb cast the issue in stark terms:

"I cannot see putting the success of home builders ahead of the success of students," she told the board.

The board has asked superintendent Heather Fiorentino to meet with County Administrator John Gallagher to establish a joint School Board-County Commission meeting to discuss impact fees. That meeting is not expected to take place before March 28.

Jeffrey S. Solochek can be reached at solochek@sptimes.com or (813) 909-4614. For more education news, visit the Gradebook at www.tampabay.com/blogs/gradebook.

St. Petersburg Times



2011 St. Petersburg Times. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.8618?icx_id=1156042 into any web browser. St. Petersburg Times and St. Petersburg Times logos are registered trademarks of St. Petersburg Times. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.