

Pasco school district says more, not less impact fees needed

By RONNIE BLAIR | The Tampa Tribune

The Pasco County School Board has a decidedly different take on the county commission's proposal to eliminate or reduce the school impact fee on new residential construction.

From the school board's perspective, the impact fee already is about half what it should be.

"We already have our 50 percent reduction," board Chairwoman Joanne Hurley said Monday during a board workshop.

The school impact fee is \$4,876 for a single-family detached home, but a 2007 study commissioned by the school board and the county commission said the fee was too low and recommended it be \$8,606.

The board asked the commission in 2008 to raise the fee, but the commission never acted on the request.

Now school officials are pointing to that study to suggest that, in effect, the county commission has already reduced the fee from what it should be.

"It's hard for me to fathom how we are going to build any schools in the future with any less than we are getting now," Hurley said. "That's something the county really needs to understand."

Once the economy bounces back and growth picks up again, Hurley said, the school district could be "behind the eight-ball" the way it was in the 1970s when classroom capacity lagged growth. Schools at that time were forced to put students on a rotating schedule to have enough space.

The school board and the county commission are scheduled to meet in a joint session April 4 to discuss the impact fee. Ultimately, though, the county commission has the final say because school boards in Florida have no authority to impose impact fees themselves.

The county commission recently began discussing the possibility of slashing the impact fees that builders pay when new homes are built. The fees are added to the price of homes.

The idea behind impact fees is that they help pay for the schools, roads, parks and other public needs created by development.

The school impact fee is just one of several. When combined, all of the impact fees for a single family home total \$16,800.

On Monday, board members heard a presentation on the impact-fee situation from Carson Bise of TischlerBise, the Bethesda, Md., consulting firm that conducted the impact fee study.

County commissioners have questioned whether the school impact fee is needed right now since the school district has completed most of its new construction. The district has one elementary school, to be built in Wesley Chapel, in its five-year capital work place.

District officials, though, have said revenue from impact fees is needed to pay the debt on bonds it issued to build other schools.

Also, Bise said even if the school district has sufficient capacity right now, there are other reasons to keep impact fees in place.

Schools would quickly go over capacity if the empty houses in foreclosure in Pasco were to become occupied, he said.

Also, there are 70,000 residential housing units already approved in Pasco. If the economy rebounds, he said, they could generate between 14,500 and 20,000 additional students for the school district.

The county has suggested any reduction in impact fees would be for a limited time and on Jan. 1, 2013, the fees would return to current levels. Hurley said she fears that, once lowered, the fees would remain lowered.

Bise said that's a legitimate concern because, if the market does bounce back, the argument then would be "you are going to thwart the recovery" by reinstating the fees.

Board member Cynthia Armstrong said she's hopeful the commissioners will recognize the important role schools play in the county.

"I know county commissioners want to make Pasco County a great place to live and education is a big part of that," Armstrong said. "They wouldn't want to do anything that would jeopardize the Pasco County school district because it does bring a huge quality of life to Pasco County."

Board member Steve Luikart, though, said the district needs to be ready with a contingency plan in case the county commission goes through with the impact-fee reduction.

He suggested the district look at the possibility of a four-day work week to offset some of lost revenue.

"That's one area where I think we could have some significant savings," Luikart said.

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