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Impact fees gain crucial support

A Times Editorial
Published June 9, 2005

Higher impact fees to help build schools in Pasco County have an unlikely ally: the Pasco Building Association.

Unlike five years ago, when builders tried one stall tactic after another in an attempt to derail county adoption of its first-ever school impact fee, the acquiescence this time came relatively peacefully.

"We support the ordinance," Robert Williams, the association's lawyer, said Tuesday. "It's the cost of doing business. We understand that."

The comprehension may have been slow in coming, but it certainly is welcome. Of course, the altruism likely comes with an ulterior motive. The Pasco Building Association still wants the county to switch collection methods. It advocates a system known as capacity fee assessments, essentially a 10-year assessment paid by the home buyer, instead of a one-time upfront charge due before a new home can be occupied. That debate, however, is down the road.

The builders' support, as stated by Williams, came just before the County Commission voted 4-0, with Commissioner Ted Schrader absent, to boost the school impact fees by about 155 percent: from just less than \$1,700 to \$4,314 for a single-family home. Increasing land values, higher posthurricane prices for concrete and steel, and greater than expected growth in the number of Pasco school-age children are driving the jump.

Consider the growth. The Pasco school district is gaining 3,000 children in a single school year, though not exclusively from home construction. Still, the building boom is substantial. The county averages about 125 new residential permit applications daily.

The district has collected more than \$30-million in Pasco's impact fee revenue over the past four years. It might sound impressive, but the cost of the new Longleaf Elementary opening in August is nearly \$12-million to house 664 children. It's not extravagant. The cost per square foot is just under \$126, or less than the statewide average compiled three years ago.

Longleaf and Seven Oaks Elementary, under construction in Wesley Chapel, are

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the first components of an ambitious schedule to open 10 new schools by August 2006. So ambitious, in fact, district officials acknowledged Tuesday that the new Wiregrass Ranch High School may open in 14 months with classrooms, but no athletic amenities or finished parking lot. It is questionable if the cafeteria will be functioning.

There is no denying the need. The district has said it needs 23 schools in the next five years to keep up with student growth. Pasco has the equivalent of nine elementary schools housed in portable classrooms, and the School Board recently agreed to spend \$4.7-million to buy 100 more portables to help handle crowding. The district also adopted 10-period days, essentially modified double sessions, at crowded middle and high schools to allow buildings to accommodate more students.

Higher impact fees will not solve the problem, but they will provide a reliable funding source to try to keep pace with growth. It's a lesson that finally is hitting home. Strong public schools behoove everyone, including the home-building industry.

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