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Polk passes big increase in impact fee to aid schools

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BARTOW -- The Polk County Commission secured future funding for education last week when it voted to increase the school impact fee by more than 400 percent on single-family homes.

The school impact fee for single-family homes will jump from \$1,607 to \$8,596 beginning Dec. 1.

Commissioners based their decision on a study conducted earlier this year that suggested the amount be increased.

Polk officials earlier this year said the county faces a deficit of about \$600 million for government projects such as road construction and parks, and is short an additional \$300 million for needed school projects.

Impact fees can be used only to fund future growth.

Commissioner Randy Wilkinson was the only member of the five-person board to vote against the increase.

"We're doing something that's unconstitutional, and we'll be sued for it," Wilkinson said after the vote.

He's referring to a debate about whether the impact fee should allow funding for schools to meet the class-size-amendment requirements.

Wilkinson has said he favors a much lower impact fee of about \$2,800 that excludes class-size-amendment requirements.

The Polk County Builders Association also has said it supports the lower figure.

But other commissioners and School Board members said the county shouldn't depend on the state to

send money to fund the requirements.

"Doing this was the right thing to do," School Board member Frank O'Reilly said.

"I'm very proud of the county commissioners for what they did," he said. "It's been a long road coming, but I really think it's wonderful."

Polk's new impact fee makes it one of the highest in Central Florida.

After a recent legal battle, a judge ruled Osceola County's school impact fee of \$9,708 is reasonable. Builders are challenging that decision.

And officials in Lake County are considering a proposal to boost their school impact fee from \$7,055 to \$10,775.

Already this year, commissioners voted to increase or expand impact fees for the county jail, roads, parks and recreation, and emergency medical services.

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