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Polk's school fees could jump

Commissioners will decide whether to raise the impact fee on new homes by as much as \$7,000.

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The Polk County Commission has proved so far this year that it supports allowing growth to pay for itself with impact fees.

Already in 2005, the five-member commission has increased or expanded impact fees for the county jail, roads, parks and recreation, and emergency medical services.

And commissioners will have yet another opportunity to raise impact fees on Wednesday when they decide whether the fee for schools should be increased.

If commissioners follow one suggestion from a study, the impact fee for single-family homes could jump from \$1,607 to \$8,596 -- an increase of more than 400 percent.

That would make Polk County's school impact fee 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.

And School Board members in nearby Lake County are expected to vote Monday to request that the County Commission increase its school impact fee from \$7,055 to \$10,775.

The Polk County Builder's Association does not support the proposed higher impact fee.

That organization favors a much lower impact fee of about \$2,800 that excludes class-size amendment requirements, according to a statement released by the PCBA.

"While the general public continues to be under the impression that impact fees are paid by home builders and commercial developers, this fallacy has made the implementation and increase in these proposed fees politically attractive," the PCBA statement said.

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"These fees are paid by the homeowners and are incorporated into the cost of a 30-year mortgage. These fees are actually much higher than the original number because it is paid during the entire life of the mortgage."

Homes in Polk County, however, remain much cheaper than in surrounding areas. In July, the median sales price in Lakeland-Winter Haven was \$161,100 and \$247,000 in Orlando.

Commissioner Randy Wilkinson also supports the lower impact fee.

But commissioners Paul Senft and Bob English have said they support the higher amount because they want to comply with Florida's class-size amendment.

"It is much higher than what I would like it to be, and I wish the state would take responsibility for paying the cost to comply with the small class amendment," English said. "If that was the case, the impact fee would be around \$2,400."

School Board member Frank O'Reilly, who is critical of past commissions he says did not implement full impact fees when they should have, said he thinks many Polk County residents support impact fees.

"The people are saying growth and development must pay its fair share," he said.

"Quit fooling around. Do it. Move on."

But some Polk County residents say the recent onslaught of impact-fee increases may be too much.

"It's going to hurt a lot of people," said Robert Zajac, who bought a home in Four Corners about one year ago.

He wonders why commissioners won't place a moratorium on construction to stop growth instead of increasing impact fees and possibly raising property taxes.

"It's like they're going nuts," he said. "There's no control down there."

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