

Polk jacks up impact fee so it can build more schools

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BARTOW -- Lagging far behind in getting growth to pay for itself, Polk County commissioners on Wednesday approved a more than 400 percent increase in the impact fee to help build new schools.

The commission voted 4-1 to boost the fee on new residential development from \$1,607 to \$8,596 for each new single-family home built. The fee for a new mobile home will be \$5,843. Commissioner Randy Wilkinson cast the dissenting vote.

Polk officials last spring calculated that they faced a deficit of nearly \$600 million in being able to pay for road construction, new water and sewer plants, jail expansion, fire stations, libraries and parks that the fast-growing county is projected to need. The gap in school funding added \$300 million more to the county's deficit.

Earlier this year, the commission increased or expanded impact fees for the county jail, roads, parks and recreation, and emergency medical services.

After a recent legal battle, a judge ruled that Osceola County's school impact fee of \$9,708 -- now the highest in Florida -- is reasonable. Builders are challenging that decision. Lake County officials are considering a proposal to boost their school impact fee from \$7,055 to \$10,775.

The Polk County Builder's Association had argued in favor of a much lower impact fee of about \$2,800.

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

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