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Polk scrabbles to pay for growth

As county shortfall looms, new-home fees rise to about \$15,300

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Commissioners voted last week to decrease Polk's road impact fee for single-family homes, but the county continues to maintain one of the highest impact-fee totals in Central Florida.

In a unanimous vote, commissioners Wednesday decreased the transportation impact fee for single-family homes from \$7,447 to \$5,844 because of a recent property-tax increase that will allocate funds for road projects.

Commissioners also voted Wednesday to implement a library impact fee of \$197 for single-family homes.

The latest impact-fee changes give Polk County an impact-fee total of about \$15,300 for new homes.

Faced with a looming \$581 million shortfall and fearing an increase in that shortfall, commissioners have raised or expanded six impact fees this year.

But Polk County isn't alone in the race to raise impact fees.

"The counties that have grown substantially . . . are now starting to say we need to better manage growth," said Aubrey Jewett, a University of Central Florida political science professor.

"They are reluctant to do anything to slow down growth," he said. "And then all of a sudden they realize they have nowhere near the money they need for the services. They start adopting new impact fees and raising the existing ones dramatically."

Polk historically has had low impact fees and slow growth.

Until this year's onslaught of fee increases, impact fees for single-family homes in Polk totaled about

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Some commissioners have recently said they wished their predecessors implemented impact fees in the 1980s and perhaps the shortfall could have been avoided.

County records show that during fiscal year 1998-99, Polk collected about \$1.9 million in impact fees and about \$4.9 million in fiscal year 1999-2000.

State reports show in 1998, Osceola County collected \$4.4 million and in 1999 about \$4.7 million in impact fees.

And during those same two years, Seminole County collected \$16.8 million and \$17.9 million, respectively, from its impact fees.

Polk implemented its first school impact fee in September 2003 at \$1,607, much less than a study recommended.

That impact fee, combined with an increase in residential building permits, allowed Polk to collect about \$8.6 million in impact fees in fiscal 2002-03, and about \$11.2 million in 2003-04.

Builders in Polk County already have said they are considering taking legal action against the school-impact fee that was recently increased from \$1,607 to \$8,596.

Because of such litigation and discrepancies among impact fees in Florida counties, state lawmakers want to know whether legislation is needed to regulate how the fees are calculated and applied.

Earlier this year, the Legislature set up a task force that will report to the governor about whether and how lawmakers should get involved in the impact-fee debate.

At a recent meeting in Orlando, elected officials, including Polk Commissioner Paul Senft, told the task force they want to keep their current flexibility and are leery of any intervention by the state.

But a Florida Home Builders Association representative told the task force that impact fees in Florida are unfair and inconsistent.

Winter Haven engineer Dave Carter is a member of that task force and a member of the Polk County Builders Association.

He said builders are concerned that skyrocketing impact fees might push potential homeowners and businesses out of the market.

"The biggest concern right now is affordability," Carter said. "The price of housing is going on up," and when impact fees are added to that cost, he said, "it almost by definition makes affordable housing a thing of the past."

"The schoolteachers, the policemen, the firemen . . . it's going to be very difficult for them to get into a

new house," he said. "You're squeezing them out of the American dream."

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