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Public Library Impact Fee Proposed

Panel questions a consultant's cost estimate for new library buildings.

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BARTOW -- Consultant Randy Young proposed a \$130 impact fee for library service Wednesday, but members of a county committee want more information about costs and credits before they're ready to recommend the fee to the County Commission.

Committee members questioned the \$101-per-square-foot cost of building a new library, arguing that was based on the construction of the Winter Haven Public Library and did not include land costs, which would be included in the costs of any other new facility.

Member George Lindsey, a Lakeland developer, questioned why the committee didn't look at alternatives to building new libraries. He suggested that leasing and renovating existing buildings is an option.

Committee member Ann Toney-Deal, city manager in Haines City, disagreed, saying her experience with renovations have shown her it's cheaper to build a new facility.

County commissioners will consider levying an additional tax in next year's budget to pay for libraries.

That would pay for the construction of eight new libraries and the renovation of five others, committee members were told.

The question is how much of that money will be applied to catching up on the backlog in library demand or for current operating expenses and how much of it will be applied to deal with new growth.

The portion of the taxes new residents pay for growth-related expenses could be counted as a credit -- the exact amount is undetermined -- that would be deducted from the impact fee. The rest could not be deducted.

Young said he based his figures on continuing at the current level of service, noting that the library profession's standards for library facilities are higher.

For instance, Polk provides 0.36 square feet of library space per resident, but the state and national standard is 0.6 square feet.

Lindsey said he didn't think that was worth pursuing.

"If you adopt every level of service of every professional organization, you'd have to turn over your check and endorse it," he said. "That's why local officials have the ability to make judgments."

Part of the library impact fee is intended to replace taxes as a way to pay the county's \$2.4 million annual contribution to the Polk County Library Cooperative, which gives county residents free access to city libraries. The rest will provide additional money to pay for the construction of new libraries and the expansion of existing facilities.

"It feels a little bit like a shell game," said Robert Dodd, chairman of the Impact Fee Advisory Committee.

But Assistant County Manager Lee Ann Thomas said it frees money county officials need to pay for state-mandated juvenile justice expenses.

"We're just figuring out how to pay for everything," she said.

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