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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Florence school officials work to create impact fees by *DANA GREEN -Ravalli Republic*

With subdivisions come more students - and Florence-Carlton School District officials are hoping to design a fair method of charging developers for impacts to their already overcrowded school system.

In the wake of a handful of dense subdivisions being built near Florence, and a mammoth 650-lot development, Aspen Springs, proposed east of town, a Florence school board committee met Tuesday to try to determine an appropriate mitigation fee for new subdivisions within their district.

Under current subdivision regulations, school districts in Ravalli County propose a voluntary mitigation fee - and if county commissioners agree with the amount, the developer is assessed the fee when the subdivision is approved.

Committee members in Florence plan to gather precise information on overcrowded conditions and how much each additional student will cost the school district, according to Vickie Cornish, school board vice-chair and a committee member.

The new committee includes two school board members, including Cornish, High School Principal Rebecca Stapert, and four community members.

School districts need to provide thorough documentation during the subdivision process to show how they have calculated their mitigation fees, Cornish said.

"This committee was basically formed to look at what would go into that documentation," she said.

The school board formed the committee for two reasons: a school district stretched to the seams, and the high-density subdivisions currently on the horizon in the Florence area.

With voters denying three bond measures to expand Florence school facilities in the last five years, the problem is not a new one, according to Cornish.

Currently, the Florence-Carlton School, which conducts elementary, middle and high school classes, holds 915 students, in a facility built for 850, according to school officials.

"There's not one inch of space left down there," Cornish said. "We're going to need another building at some point."

With taxpayers reluctant to pay for additional growth, that leaves developers - whose projects bring a wave of new students into the school system.

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It is unclear at this point how mitigation fees would be used - whether it would help pay for additional portable classrooms, staff or in some other capacity, according to Cornish.

"Is the fee going to solve everything? No. But it will certainly help," Cornish said.

In the meantime, changes at the state level could allow counties to directly assess developers impact fees for schools and other services.

Under current state law, county commissioners cannot deny a subdivision based solely on impacts on schools.

Instead, school districts have asked for the voluntary fee to mitigate such impacts - and it is up to commissioners to decide whether the amount is fair.

With the passage of Senate Bill 185 during this legislative session, the door has been opened for counties and other municipalities to assess all types of impact fees, including school fees, to fund necessary capital improvements.

The bill clarified for county officials that they could move forward on impact fees, which had been previously challenged in the courts, according to Ravalli County Planning Director Patrick O'Herren.

"(Senate Bill 185) made it very clear that counties could collect impact fees - that wasn't clear before this Legislature," said O'Herren.

Ravalli County commissioners have currently authorized a study to examine road impact fees on new developments, but have not yet expanded that study to include other types of fees, including school and fire districts.

The Florence-Carlton School District mitigation fee committee will meet again on May 9 at 7 p.m.

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