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Palm Beach Post Editorial

Monday, June 20, 2005

Builders often oppose increasing them. Governments frequently are nervous about imposing them. Taxpayers, however, should be grateful for impact fees, which charge some of the costs of growth to new residents.

On the Treasure Coast, both Martin and St. Lucie counties are taking steps to minimize the bills for existing residents as the effects of growth take hold. The one-time fees on new homes and other construction pay for the roads, libraries, fire stations and schools that serve residents under new rooftops.

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Martin voted last week to start public hearings that are needed to raise its fees by almost 50 percent, which would make its charges among the state's highest. One county commissioner, Sarah Heard, thinks the new charges still would be too low and that new road costs have been underestimated. In addition, she points out, the commission is considering a sales tax to help pay for road construction, which would indicate that impact fees still are too low. A new home between 1,101 and 2,300 square feet would pay a one-time charge of \$7,284, up from \$5,010. Marinas, warehouses and other businesses would face higher charges. The new fees would bring in an estimated \$7 million a year.

In St. Lucie, the school board approved an impact fee increase of nearly \$2,000 per home, boosting educational development fees from \$3,061 to \$4,956. The school district expects 2,300 new students this fall, a growth rate that officials believe requires building four elementary schools a year. While impact fees would contribute between \$250 and \$450 million to new school needs over the next 20 years, the construction budget for that period is estimated at \$2 billion. The district last raised fees two years ago.

The school district plans to ask voters in September to renew a half-cent sales tax, and within a few years will ask for a

bond issue that would raise property taxes. St. Lucie's school impact fees are close to the state average, but twice as high as Martin and Indian River counties'. That's because neighboring counties have slower rates of growth than booming St. Lucie.

Adjusting impact fees is an important part of healthy growth. To do less places an unfair burden on the people already living on the Treasure Coast. Both Martin County and the St. Lucie County School Board are correct to raise their fees this time. If growth continues at current rates, it won't be the last time.

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