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Rising impact-fee revenue will help defray cost of new, renovated schools

By Deirdre Conner

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When you add rapid growth to tightening restrictions on class size, the other end of the equation has to include dozens of new school construction projects.

Figuring out how those projects are paid for, however, isn't simple math.

Building new schools and adding on to old ones are top priorities for the Lee County School District in the coming year. Additions to 17 district schools — a huge, \$100 million endeavor — will open more classroom space for the next school year.

But even with impact fees set to double on Jan. 1 and the collections already beating projections this year, the district will still borrow money to pay for new schools.

"We have not gotten the capital dollars (from the state) necessary to balance that equation. We're getting the money operationally for teachers, but we haven't gotten what we need for capital," Lee schools Superintendent James Browder said.

By all accounts, impact fees are paralleling growth trends in Lee, going up far faster and higher than ever expected.

As of September 2005, new home permits have generated \$105.2 million since the county began collecting school impact fees in December 2001. Of that, the south zone generated \$29.5 million; the east zone encompassing Lehigh Acres and Alva \$31.9 million, and the west zone — mostly Cape Coral — \$43.8 million.

On Jan. 1, those fees will double, raising \$4,345 per single-family home and \$1,719 for a multifamily home.

Lee schools officials first estimated impact fees would bring in \$45 million this year. Now, they think

that amount will go up 50 percent, to \$65.9 million or more.

But that increase may just offset the increasing cost of construction.

Upcoming projects may cost 20 to 40 percent more, according to Jim Buckley, the district's acting chief financial officer.

At the same time, new schools aren't coming to south Lee any time soon.

The district is still hoping to negotiate with the city of Bonita Springs over the controversial Tower Road property that originally was to be the home of Rayma C. Page Elementary. After the Bonita Springs City Council denied the request to build the school at the east Bonita site, the district decided to leave Page Elementary at its current site on Alico Road and U.S. 41.

But impact fees are being used to finance additions to south zone elementary schools, according to financial documents the district submitted for review by county commissioners this month. The additions, which cost between \$4 million and \$5 million, will add 16 to 18 classrooms to Pinewoods and San Carlos Park elementaries, as well as to Allen Park, Villas, Tanglewood and Colonial elementaries in Fort Myers.

Building on to existing schools, Browder has said, will defray the effects of the tightening class-size restrictions and the influx of new students without having to search for new land, a constant and costly struggle. The additions will add space for approximately 1,533 students in the south zone.

When Lee County commissioners approved the impact fee increase earlier this month, Commissioner John Albion raised questions about how the money would be spent.

If impact fees are used to pay for growth in the district, then that is appropriate, he said. However, if they are used to build more classrooms, which are needed because of the class size amendment, then that is a violation of constitutional law, Albion said.

Currently, the state measures class size on a districtwide average.

Next year, class sizes will be measured school-by-school. That means there must be no more than an average of 18 students in grades kindergarten through three, 22 in grades four through eight and 25 in high school classes.

The class size amendment puts the burden of paying for the class size reductions on the state, not on local districts. It reads: "Beginning with the 2003-2004 fiscal year, the legislature shall provide sufficient funds to reduce the average number of students in each classroom by at least two students per year until the maximum number of students per classroom does not exceed the requirements."

Albion said he doesn't want locally collected impact fees going to pay for construction needed to expand the district's classroom capacity.

"Are we collecting more in impact fees than we should be?" Albion asked. "The costs to get the existing classroom population where it needs to be are supposed to be borne by the state."

Browder assured Albion and other Lee commissioners that the district isn't using impact fees to subsidize the class size amendment.

"(The) class size amendment is being funded out of borrowed dollars," Browder said. "Impact fees (are) funding growth."

The state hasn't fully funded the amendment, causing the district to borrow almost \$250 million to reduce its class sizes, he said. Lee schools have received approximately \$28 million from the state Legislature to defray the expense of building extra classrooms for the class size requirements. That's the cost of about two elementary schools.

Albion said he would like the district to figure out how many additional classrooms were needed to accommodate the amendment and how many were needed to accommodate growth. Once that calculation is made, the district will know exactly how much the state owes.

Impact fees make up a mere quarter of the entire capital budget, which is used to pay for major needs such as new schools, technological upgrades and major renovations. Only 7.4 percent of that money comes from the state. The bulk of it comes from local taxes.

Browder said he's glad to see other public officials are concerned about state funding of the class size amendment.

"If it is supposed to come out of Tallahassee, then that needs to be made straight," Albion said.

If the state refuses to pay, then it may face lawsuits from districts throughout the state, he said.

"If you don't sue for your rights, then you pay," Albion said.

Staff writer Julio Ochoa contributed to this report.

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