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News
Front Page
Community
Island News
Entertainment
News
School
Sports
Faith
Calendar of Events
Seniors
Home & Garden
Opinion
Legals
Archives
Advertising
Classifieds
Current Ads
Classified Order
Ad Rates
Subscription
Links
City of Gulf Breeze
Splash Magazine
Search Archive

Front Page May 12, 2005

SR schools could be built with impact fees

• School Board studying possibility of assessing fees on construction

By Chris Chatelain

Gulf Breeze News

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In an effort to establish a new revenue stream that will keep pace with the growing county population, the Santa Rosa School Board is exploring the possibility of using school impact fees to fund the construction of new schools.

School impact fees are charges that are applied to new construction within a county to raise revenue and help county school systems keep up with population growth. The Santa Rosa County School District took on an additional 36,000-plus students between 1990 - 2000, and that number is expected to continue to increase the next several years as the county population and economy continue to blossom. With growth come new homes and new families, and with new families come new students.

“School impact fees are just one of the tools we have in the toolbox right now,” said Santa Rosa School Board Chairman Ed Gray. “Staff is conducting a study to determine many variables such as how much to assess and upon who and what to assess it. We are at the very beginning of this right now, so not much is known or can be said about it, but we are talking with and learning from other counties that have such school impact fees and how they might fit into our school system.”

If passed and enacted, Santa Rosa would be the first county in Northwest Florida to have such fees.

Gray suggested that everything the county has learned thus far would indicate that the fees would be assessed only on new residential construction within the county, and most likely not commercial

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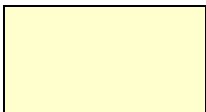
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construction. “Residential construction is what is going to have the impact on our school system in the future through the introduction of new students, so that’s the reason for the focus on residential at this point,” said Gray. “The data from the study should be able to tell us whether this is way to go. We are simply looking for ways to keep in tune with the actual growth of the county, and this is one way that we may be able to do just that.”

Gray said that the study will focus on assessing the cost, per resident, of each student upon the school system, and then anticipating the necessary construction of new schools or upgrading current schools based upon the growth rate.

“It’s a study at this point, but it is something that we are looking at earnestly and the board will vote to do whatever is in the best interest of the future of this school system,” said Gray.

About 20 of Florida’s 67 counties have implemented varying degrees of school impact fees with varying degrees of success. In Osceola County, homebuilders filed a lawsuit against that county’s school system after the impact fees were raised from \$2,000 to \$10,000. However, the impact fees have remained unchallenged in other counties and have allowed for the construction of many new schools in Volusia and Seminole Counties.

The Santa Rosa School District Administration and School Board is still gathering data from other counties using impact fees, and have not discussed any figures relating to how much school impact fees may be here in the county, Gray said.

Twenty-three Florida counties assess school impact fees, and the average impact fee assessed is \$3,124.

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