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Sarasota school leaders look to halt impact fees

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Almost two years after school impact fees were suspended in Manatee County, Sarasota County School Board members want to give a similar boost to local home builders.

Their biggest hurdle may be convincing Sarasota County commissioners to approve the move.

Board members Tuesday night gave their approval to a two-year moratorium on the fees it collects on new homes to pay for new schools or classrooms. With enrollment falling and no new schools being built, it no longer makes sense to levy the fee, members said.

But the move must still be approved by county commissioners, who voted down a similar proposal in May 2009.

During the real estate boom, impact fees were seen as vital to enable local government agencies to keep pace with growth. The school district receives about \$2,000 on every new single-family home built.

In the 2006-07 school year, that added up to more than \$10 million.

But with construction now stalled, the district received only \$536,000 last year.

By law, the money can only be spent on projects that increase school capacity or for new schools. The district has no such projects in its five-year capital construction plan.

"It doesn't make sense to continue to ask people to pay impact fees when we're not building any new schools and not adding any new wings," said board member Kathy Kleinlein.

But it is unclear whether county commissioners will authorize the move. By state law, the county collects impact fees on behalf of the district.

Commissioner Jon Thaxton said the board voted down the proposal last year because it contravened the county's comprehensive plan for development.

Waiving the fees, would mean that burden would be passed onto the taxpayer in the future, Thaxton said.

"You still have to build the schools; you still have to build the parks and libraries," Thaxton said. "Someone has to pay for it."

Thaxton said that the district would need to show the commission that new homes would not result in increased need for school construction.



But School Board members are not happy that another elected body has the final say on their fee.

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Impact fees for a single-family home in Manatee County were cut by about \$10,000 to \$5,500 in 2009 after the Manatee County School Board waived its fee and county commissioners halved the amount collected for road construction.

In Sarasota County, the impact fee for a 2,000-square-foot home is almost \$15,000.

Alan Anderson, executive vice president of the Homebuilders Association of Manatee and Sarasota, said impact fee cuts in Manatee had led to more homes being built there.

"We believe there is evidence that by doing this, it has encouraged new construction and new job creation," Anderson said. "It has retained employees in firms who might have had to let people go."

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