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School impact fee cuts would worsen crowding

By Times Wire

Supporters of a plan to halve the fee assessed on new homes to help pay for school construction contend the debate has been muddled by misinformation about school district spending, building plans, employment, state budget cuts and emotional pleas of hurting children.

The gripe might have more legitimacy if those same supporters didn't present skewed arguments of their own. Tuesday evening, Pasco County government's leading proponent of cutting impact fees dropped another whopper.

An impact fee cut is justifiable because Pasco County schools are operating at 79 percent capacity, Commissioner Jack Mariano told a town hall meeting, according to a report in *the Tampa Tribune*. Mariano could not be reached Thursday to verify his statement or to provide the source of his data.

Mariano should travel his own district more often. Hudson Elementary enrollment is 122 percent of capacity. Moon Lake Elementary is at 115 percent. It's why the Pasco County School District already has acquired land to build an elementary school off Hicks Road in the next few years. Just one problem. There is no construction money to pay for it.

The number permanent seats in Pasco schools is significantly lower than Mariano indicated. Capacity projections for the coming school year are 93 percent for elementary schools, 89 percent for middle schools and 92 percent for high schools. Enrollment is more than 66,000 students.

Yes, there is space to add new pupils. Unfortunately, that space, in most instances, is in non-growth areas. Lacochee Elementary can handle an influx of children; elementary schools along the State Road 54/56 corridor in central Pasco cannot. Pineview, Sand Pine, Oakstead and Seven Oaks elementary schools in Land O'Lakes and Wesley Chapel are 15 to 35 percent above optimum capacity. Ditto for secondary schools. The School Board had to redraw attendance boundaries for next year because John Long Middle and Wiregrass Ranch High schools each have 400 more students than permanent desks.

As far as we can tell, Mariano must like the thought of kids learning in a portable classroom - those trailers parked on crowded school campuses across the county that are so flimsy the children and faculty had to evacuate them last month during stormy weather. Including the district's inventory of portable classrooms is the only way to remotely arrive at Mariano's capacity figure.

It is simply irresponsible to suggest an impact fee cut will not be detrimental to the Pasco School District. High-growth areas cannot accommodate more students even if 20 percent of desks are empty after tossing in 470 portable classrooms at the district's more than 80 public schools.

The shell game needs to end. The places most likely to see new homes built already have overcrowded schools. Cutting the impact fee as an economic stimulus plan - if it is successful - will only increase the problem by adding families while simultaneously lessening school construction dollars that should be available.

Mariano and the rest of the commission must acknowledge that fact as part of the public debate on cutting the school impact fee. Better yet, they could schedule a town hall meeting at Seven Oaks Elementary where more than 900 students attend a school built to house 674.

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