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School Board weighs legal fight

Groveland and the board struck an impact-fee deal, but now the city says it will keep the money to build a charter school.

By Vicki McClure
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TAVARES -- School Board members thought they had a deal.

Groveland agreed to collect an extra \$2,000 in impact fees for each home from developers so the district could build more classrooms in the city.

Board members subsequently began a \$9.1 million renovation and expansion of Groveland Elementary this summer, which adds new seats for 234 more students and replaces the old administration building. They were planning to defray some of the cost by using the city impact fees, which total about \$700,000 to date.

But city officials changed their minds and decided to keep the money for themselves to build a charter school.

Board members responded Monday night by instructing their lawyer to ask a judge to determine whether city officials could violate their own ordinance. The city's impact fees also constitute an illegal tax under state statutes if the revenue does not go to the district, board attorney Steve Johnson said.

Groveland's move could have repercussions throughout the county if successful.

Lady Lake officials tentatively have approved a \$3,000 supplemental impact fee to help build a middle school and high school in their area.

Lady Lake wants to work with the School Board, said Town Manager Bill Vance, but will consider all options to have new secondary campuses built in the next year or two.

The fees will generate about \$3 million annually, he said. A new middle school with a capacity for 1,150

students built to state standards for public schools costs \$40 million.

"We are trying to do what we need to do on our end to stimulate what they need to do on their end," Vance said. "If that [a charter] turns out to be the only feasible option, obviously we would have to take a look at it."

The board's legal tussle with Groveland is not the first time the district has taken growth disputes with cities to court.

It sued Mascotte last year to halt an annexation of 115 acres that would have enabled the city to annex an abutting tract of 854 acres in the future. Development of those parcels would have added hundreds of students to the district's overcrowded campuses. The board eventually settled after the developer donated 40 acres for a new school.

Groveland City Council member Richard Smith offered to negotiate on Tuesday, even though no one had approached the board before the city decided to try and keep the money.

"I'm sure that reasonable people on both sides can find a reasonable solution," said Smith. "I would be disappointed if the School Board proceeded legally without sitting down to discuss the matter face to face."

School Board Chairman Scott Strong said cities need to keep their word.

The \$9.1 million that is being spent on Groveland Elementary also could have been used to expand South Lake High, which is far more overcrowded.

The board had to postpone adding classrooms to the South Lake this year because it lacked the money. South Lake is projected to exceed capacity by 493 students this fall; by comparison, Groveland is expected to be overcrowded by 185 students.

"If you are going to promise us something, then follow up on it," Strong said. "We want to be partners with municipalities."

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