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School District explores impact fees

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— The School District is exploring the idea of collecting impact fees to help deal with growth management.

A few weeks ago the School Board invited Baker County School Superintendent Paula Barton and Support Services Director Marcelle Richardson to speak at a workshop about the issue. Baker County Schools, who are in the process of implementing impact fees, shared with the School Board the process they are going through to enact the fees.

Explaining impact fees Barton said when new growth occurs there's an impact on several entities including schools, roads, law enforcement and fire services that someone must pay for.

"When growth comes in, the student population increases," she said. "Are we the residents going to absorb that cost? Are the new folks coming in going to absorb that?"

Or are we going to share the cost?"

Richardson explained the first step Baker County took was getting the county manager and county commissioners to approve the idea. Next, they conducted a study to justify the need for collecting the fees. Third, the commission passed an impact fee ordinance for the school district.

She said the Baker County school board could collect up to \$5,068 as justified by the study. However, you don't want to set the fee at the maximum amount, she said.

Richardson said Baker County commissioners set impact fees for the county at \$1,500 and for the school district at \$1,500, for the first couple of years with a 20 percent increase for five years. After that time the district would again conduct a study to justify the fees, she said.

The Baker County school district will collect a flat fee of \$1,500 from households consisting of those who set up mobile homes and those who construct single-family dwellings or multi-family dwellings. The county will collect those fees only for construction of commercial or industrial buildings.

Richardson said the money generated from impact fees for the school district can be used for new buildings and computers and other equipment for classrooms.

"It can only be used for new units. It can't be used for any type of replacement," she said.

At the workshop Suwannee Superintendent of Schools Walter Boatright asked if dealing with class-size reduction mandates coupled with having limited available facilities would be a justification for the fee.

"Yes, because it's a new classroom," Richardson replied.

Barton said impact fees would be imposed on all people constructing a new dwelling, including those who move into the county and those already living there.

The Suwannee County School District is seeking the alternative to generate impact fee dollars because they say school attendance is up and Public Education Capital Outlay (PECO) dollars and Special Facilities Funds, which pay for new growth are quickly slipping away.

Suwannee County Commissioner Randy Hatch said the commission has not yet been formally addressed by the School Board about the idea, though he has discussed the issue with some School Board members.

Hatch said he is not opposed to the idea of implementing impact fees.

"I'm certainly open minded to it, but it's not a cure all," he said. "Once fees pay the initial cost for construction of a school, how will they pay for administration and teachers for that school?"

Hatch said impact fees will be assessed against new construction and would not affect anyone purchasing an existing home.

"For instance, if an older couple who own a 4,000 square foot home decides to down size by building a smaller home, because it would be a new structure they would have to pay the fee," he said. "The impact fees would be collected from the

developer. They would tack them on and those having the home built may not even know it."

The School Board would only have the authority to impose those fees on residential construction, because residents are the ones who will impact schools, he said.

Hatch said the fees would pay for new schools and roads and additional police and EMS services.

"Growth is not going to lessen. You can be reactionary or proactive and visionary," Barton said.

Boatright said the student population was up more than 180 students this school year from last year.

"Small districts are having to be creative to find ways to deal with growth management," Boatright said.

If the County Commission is favorable to the idea, which some on the County Commissioners have said they are not, the School District will have to hire a professional to do a study to justify the fee. The County Commission would then have to approve it and develop a county ordinance.

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