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School Board's Fee Revenue Plans Set

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BARTOW -- Less than a week after Polk County Commissioners passed higher school impact fees, the School Board already has planned how to spend the extra \$128 million in fee revenue.

On the agenda for the next five years is a \$9 million expansion for Harrison Center for the Visual and Performing Arts, \$5 million medical arts building at Ridge Career Center and \$4 million worth of buildings for Summerlin Academy, a new, military-style, choice high school at Bartow High.

Commissioners passed the higher fees on Sept. 15, highlighted by an \$8,596 charge -- a 435 percent increase -- for each new single-family home built in the county. The fee for a new mobile home installed in the county climbed 476 percent to \$4,650, and for each new multi-family unit built the fee will be \$5,843, a 602 percent jump.

The money collected through the fees will be used to build new classrooms and schools for growth and compliance with the class-size amendment.

The county will start collecting the fee Dec. 1.

In its draft capital improvement plan for the next five years, the district already had planned to build 146 construction projects, including 13 new schools, at a cost of \$373.78 million.

Now, with \$127.7 million more through impact fees, district officials added 21 projects, bringing the total for construction to more than \$500 million in the next five years. Some of the new projects funded by the impact fee are new, others have been moved up based on need from later years in

the School District's long range 15-year capital improvement plan, said Bob Williams, assistant superintendent of Facilities and Operations.

School Board members got their first look at the additional projects and updated construction plan at a workshop Tuesday morning.

Besides Harrison, Ridge and Summerlin -- all of which should begin the design phase sometime this school year -- the new project list includes \$15 million over five years to replace old air conditioning systems at schools across the county, \$15 million over five years to buy land for future schools and classroom additions, and \$21 million to renovate Kathleen High, Auburndale High and Bartow High.

All are slated to start the construction process by 2009-10.

The Sales Tax Oversight Committee hasn't yet reviewed the revised five-year plan, Williams said.

If not for the higher impact fee, Superintendent Gail McKinzie said most of Polk's schools would have to be on double sessions soon.

"We'd be on triple sessions," said School Board member Margaret Lofton.

"We'd be back in the Dark Ages and educationally regressing," added board member Jack English.

Despite a tight market for materials and subcontractors, Williams said he doesn't anticipate too many major problems getting all of the construction jobs completed relatively on time.

"We've added a lot of additional construction work with hopes of getting it all done," Williams said. "The chance may be that progress will slide back. But the later we start, the farther back the construction will go."

Williams said the district will stagger the bidding process for its largest projects so that it doesn't compete with itself on projects. For example, if all the bids were open at once, subcontractors might ignore less-desirable projects that are farther away or more difficult.

"Staggering delays the process, but gives us more competitive prices," Williams said.

The district plans to start designing projects funded by the expected impact fee revenue right away, even though critics of the increased fee have questioned the legality of using the money for compliance with the class size amendment.

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