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new home impact fee

School Board Backs Levy Hike

Plan's fourfold rise in charges accounts for class-size reduction mandate.

By [Andrew Dunn](#)

The Ledger

BARTOW -- The Polk County School Board on Tuesday backed a fourfold increase in school impact fees, finally taking a firm public position in the ongoing debate over the fees.

A solid majority backed the recommendation of Bob Williams, their assistant superintendent of facilities and operations. He said the County Commission should approve a school impact fee of \$8,596 per single-family house.

But that recommendation comes with a caveat: whatever money the state provides Polk to meet class-size reduction requirements would be used to reduce the impact fee for the next year.

"That way, you are covering the class-size reduction amendment except for what is covered by the state," said Williams.

Williams said he thinks this plan would be more palatable to the County Commission, which actually will have to vote on impact fees and has the final say in the matter.

Based on what the state gives school districts for class-size reduction, the fees would be lowered by only a few hundred dollars, Williams said.

The current school impact fee is \$1,607 for a single-family home.

A county impact fee committee tasked with recommending a figure to the County Commission last week asked for the School Board to clarify its position, citing reports of concern among School Board members over the size of the proposed increase.

Five of the six board members in attendance Tuesday clearly supported Williams' idea. Board Chairwoman Kay Fields was absent because of a family emergency.

Board member Jack English offered what he called the "minority report."

English, a Polk native, said it seems everyone wants to come to the county or the state and shut the door behind them. He's concerned that adding more taxes and more fees will deteriorate Florida's reputation as an attractive and economical option for retirees.

English would not answer whether he supported Williams' recommendation.

However, he said his comments at the meeting were more of a warning to his fellow board members not to be disappointed by what the County Commission decides.

"We may not get what we asked for," he said.

Williams' recommendation was one of four included in a consultant study on school impact fees. That study will be a centerpiece of Friday's joint session of the Polk County Commission and School Board.

The other three recommendations were to approve the entire \$8,596, to exclude class-size reduction from the equation and only charge \$2,838, or to approve the entire \$8,596 and use any state class-size money to reimburse local taxpayers.

Board member Frank O'Reilly said Williams' plan is still the best option.

O'Reilly, who serves on the Florida Impact Fee Review Task Force, said voters in Polk County would approve overwhelmingly any referendum on impact fees if given the opportunity. He said he hopes the County Commission recognizes that.

"I would hope the County Commission would look at what they've done," he said. "They've raised the property taxes. The citizens are saying, 'OK, I've paid mine. What are the builders paying?'"

Williams said that the School District has 87,555 students at its last count. He said that's 6,798 more than the 80,757 students present last year, an 8.4 percent increase.

He said the current population is 3,218 students, or 3.8 percent, more than what was projected this year.

O'Reilly said growth is the real problem facing the county and its schools.

"Growth has to pay its fair share," he said. "We've got to stop fooling around with this."

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