



HOME
INDEX
SEARCH
ARCHIVES



87.0 F
Sunny

Jon Windom, D.D.S.
Doctor of Dental Surgery
Charles E. Crane, D.D.S., PA.
Doctor of Dental Surgery

Sports

Business

Opinions

Classifieds

Community

Charlotte News

Englewood News

North Port News

DeSoto News

Venice News

10/28/05

School Board hears initial school impact fee study results

ARCADIA -- With DeSoto County's population expected to jump in the next decade due to several areas of proposed development in DeSoto County, the school board and county commission board have decided to look at how impact fees might factor into paying for the accompanying costs and demands for new schools. DeSoto County School Board members and Superintendent Adrian Cline heard the preliminary findings of a school impact fee study Tuesday evening.

The board commissioned the study in May. Cline said Tuesday's presentation was an informational report to bring the school board "up to speed" on what the firm has found so far. According to the study's report, DeSoto County currently is facing a revenue shortfall for school capacity needs.

This preliminary study has determined the maximum impact fee the county and school district could levy would be \$6,121 for detached houses with zero to two bedrooms, \$11,733 for detached three-bedroom houses and \$18,558 for detached houses with four or more bedrooms. The impact fee for an attached house with zero to one bedroom would be \$3,811, \$6,430 for attached two-bedroom houses and \$13,615 for attached three-bedroom houses.

These are not final fee determinations. If another method of determining impact fees is used, such as square footage per house, these fees may change.

Impact fees, one-time payments for new development, are becoming a popular method of paying for new growth costs by an increasing number of municipalities as residents resist having taxes raised or new taxes implemented to pay for growth, according to an online report by the Brookings Institution. The report states that property taxes traditionally have financed these costs, but have proven inadequate to fund the roads, water and sewer infrastructure, and schools required by new residential and commercial development. Impact fees can only be used for new growth-related funding. They cannot be used to replace items in or renovate existing buildings, or toward operating costs.

Dwayne Guthrie of TischlerBise Fiscal, Economic and Planning Consultants presented

a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation to the school board, describing how the study was done, its formula for determining impact fees and tentative total county and school impact fees. Guthrie also has presented the study's findings to the DeSoto County Commission this week.

Guthrie explained the basic steps of a generic impact fee formula.

The first step is to determine an appropriate demand indicator for a particular type of infrastructure. An example of this kind of indicator is the average number of public school students per housing unit. The second step is infrastructure units per demand unit, called Level-Of-Service, or LOS. Common infrastructure standards are acres of school site and square feet of school buildings per student, according to the presentation. The county and school board will need to decide which method they would prefer to use. The third step is the cost of various infrastructure units, which are established by cost per acre for land acquisition and cost per square foot for school buildings.

TischlerBise used survey data from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau to determine the number of public school students by school level, type of housing and number of bedrooms. Student generation rates were determined by the 2004-05 Full-Time Equivalents (one FTE is equal to one student) and 2005 housing unit estimates for DeSoto County. The average for the total FTEs per housing development units was .31, which is averaged from detached and attached units. School District Finance Director Laurie Albritton said the FTEs are determined by the state's Department of Education and historically have predicted low student growth in DeSoto County. These FTE rates do not take into account new residential developments until housing permits are drawn for them.

The estimated cost of land and site preparation work for new school sites is \$70,000 per acre. This estimate is based on the cost of land acquired for residential development projects in southwestern DeSoto County, the report stated.

In comparison with other counties that have built new elementary schools in 2004, the report stated that one Collier County school cost \$94 per square foot, a Glades County school built in 2004 cost \$135 per square foot and a Manatee County elementary school cost \$111 per square foot. Guthrie said that these include all costs, such as new furniture and carpeting. Guthrie also pointed out that new school costs have been inconsistent even within a particular county.

Guthrie pointed out that final costs will be dependent on how much state money is received. School board members agreed that this amount varies year to year, making it difficult to anticipate how much DeSoto County would be able to receive toward new school building costs.


Guthrie told the school board, "Elected officials have final say on what impact fees to incorporate."

Both the county and the school district must approve any final impact fees.

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By LAURA A. SCHMID

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