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School board joins impact fee consideration

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With both the city of Starke and Bradford County looking to award a contract for an impact fee study at the end of January to help fund requirements set forth by the state's new growth management legislation, the school board has begun looking at how it will pay for future growth.

While the city and county commissions hope to have a schedule of impact fees in place in June that could cover everything from emergency services to utilities, the school board will explore impact fees on new development to pay for school and classroom construction.

Cities and counties are being required to work more closely than ever on planning for the future under the growth management reform legislation passed earlier this year. Not only are cities and counties required to include elements in their comprehensive plans to show how they will address and pay for their own capital improvements, a facilities element for public schools must also be added to the plans.

Impact fees will play a major role in ensuring that new developments, whether they be single family homes, small businesses, large commercial shopping centers or industrial and manufacturing companies, pay for the services they require and their impact on the community.

This will be particularly important for the state's 67 school systems as Public Education Capital Outlay, or PECO, funds are expected to disappear by 2008, as legislators are diverting those funds, derived from the Gross Receipts Utilities Tax, elsewhere. In addition, school districts can only levy 2 mills in property taxes to fund school facilities. While in a county like Nassau that would equate to \$10 million, in Bradford it's around \$1 million, according to school Finance Director Julee Tinsler.

The North East Florida Educational Consortium may step in to help school districts hire coordinators for growth management, with two to three districts sharing the cost and expertise of the same coordinator.

During a workshop on Dec. 12, Assistant Superintendent Rick Ezzell said those coordinators would be part of an advisory committee on facility growth planning that NEFEC is establishing to serve its districts. Transportation Director Otha Miller has agreed to serve on that committee.

The school board will have to work closely with the cities and county to agree on concurrency, which essentially means that new development cannot go forward if infrastructure is not there to support it.

Ezzell said the board can study and help put in place an impact fee to help pay for growth in the schools, but it will also be involved in zoning matters affecting schools. If a 500-home development is being built, the school has to have the capacity to serve the families living in that development.

As City Manager Ken Sauer explained, user fees from utilities, for example, can pay for the operation of a system, but not necessarily its growth. That's where impact fees come in.

According to County Manager Jim Crawford, those fees can be assessed on new development in the following areas: law

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enforcement, emergency management, emergency medical services, library services, parks and recreation, transportation, fire and rescue, utilities and schools.

All of these elements but schools will be looked at in the joint study for the city and county, though not all will be included in the county's ordinance at the same time. The school district can commission a study of its own and bring the results before the county commission for approval at a later date.

The studies are necessary because impact fees cannot be set arbitrarily. The amount has to be based on the results of a needs study.

Completion dates have been set for complying with the standards of the new growth management legislation. Ezzell said that date for Bradford County Schools is March 2008. At the same time, the longer the district waits to get started, the more money it's losing, he said.

School Board Member Bobby Carter discussed the studies in Baker County that showed both the county and school board each needed to collect \$3,000 in impact fees, for a total of \$6,000. That amount came under fire, however, so the Baker County Commission imposed a \$3,000 impact fees, only \$1,000 of which will go to schools in that county.

The county commission, Carter said, has to bless the impact fee the school district proposes. Political pressure could play a role in that decision.

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