



## School impact fees OK'd

*By Benjamin Price, News-Leader*

Nassau County will assess a \$3,726 school impact fee on every new home effective Aug. 24.

Nassau County Commissioners unanimously approved the fee Monday based on a recommendation from the school board.

The fee will be in addition to existing transportation, fire, emergency services, administrative, police and recreational impact fees that builders pay when they pull a permit to build a home.

Currently, those fees total \$2,484 per single family detached home in unincorporated areas of the county. As of Aug. 24, the total will increase to \$6,210.

During a public hearing prior to Monday's vote, Bill Moore of the Nassau Builders Council said his organization supports impact fees as a "partial answer," but felt there were deficiencies in the county's ordinance. He asked the commission to consider a fee less than the \$3,726 figure requested by the Nassau County School Board. He referred to a \$1 billion increase in the county's appraised property values this year as a reason the fee could be lowered.

The school board decided on the amount in March based on the results of a school capacity study it commissioned in November 2003. That study determined the fee was needed to meet the demands of the county's growing population, and schools Superintendent John Ruis said he was prepared to stand by those numbers.

"We're prepared to defend the study and data calculations," Ruis said.

Much of Monday's discussion centered on when to impose the fee. The commission discussed a range of 30 to 60 days from Monday's vote.

Daniel Davis, also of the Nassau Builders Council, said builders would prefer a waiting period of four months to prepare for the increase in cost.

However, the county had concerns about a mass of applications flooding the building department, which is already behind on processing permits.

County Building Official Whitey Moran was adamant that the implementation period should be set sooner rather than later.

"I'm the one that will take the hit," he said. "The longer you prolong this, the bigger the hit's going to be."

The commission eventually approved the ordinance effective 30 days from Monday's meeting.

Moran said after the meeting that anything "in the pipeline" prior to that date would be assessed according to the old fee schedule, but anything submitted on or after Aug. 24 will be assessed the new fee.

Commissioner Tom Branan made the motion to adopt the new fee, and commented about the relative lack of opposition Monday. The only homeowners' organization that spoke was the Amelia Island Association, and it supported the fee.

"In the early days when we started charging impact fees in 1990, it was \$500, and this place was full with people against it," he said. "Impact fees are not all of the answer, but it's a start."

The increase in impact fees may be just the beginning. The county has contracted with a private consultant to study its overall impact fee ordinance to determine if other assessments should increase.

While builders pay fees when they obtain permits, the cost is ultimately passed down to the homebuyer.

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