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## School officials consider tax increase

**If voters approved a half-cent increase, Hillsborough County's sales tax rate would be among the most expensive in the state.**

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TAMPA - Hillsborough school officials may soon ask voters to approve a half-cent sales tax that would raise \$80-million a year to build new schools and repair old ones.

Without it, the school district says it will face a \$364-million shortfall within the next five years.

At the heart of the issue is mind-boggling growth. In the last 20 years, enrollment in Hillsborough schools has grown by about 80,000 children to 192,000, making this the nation's ninth-largest school district.

Educators are expecting another 6,500 students this year - enough to fill three elementary schools, one middle school and one high school.

"We're not out of money yet," says School Board chairwoman Candy Olson, "but we're going to be."

Though most of the discussions have been behind the scenes, board members and administrators acknowledge that a half-cent sales tax may be their best option. Other possibilities include year-round schools, double sessions and massive school boundary changes.

"We have to do something," says superintendent MaryEllen Elia, who plans to begin community meetings next month. "It's incumbent on us to get the word out."

The sales tax in Hillsborough is now at 7 percent. If it went up another half percent, the county would have the highest sales tax in the Tampa Bay region, and among the highest in Florida.

The likeliest scenario would ask voters for a tax that would last for a set amount of time, such as five years, and would raise money for school construction and maintenance. Officials also are considering a pot sweetener:

Using some of the revenue to increase teacher pay, as Pinellas County did last year with a property tax hike approved by 64 percent of voters.

Hillsborough's pitch could prove a tough sell, however, because of obvious questions: What happened to the money from a 1996 half-cent sales tax increase? And why haven't school leaders been more aggressive in seeking money from developers, who are responsible for much of the county's growth?

In pushing the 1996 tax increase, community leaders said it would net schools \$678-million over 30 years, averting the threat of double sessions. Millions more were split among other projects, including roads, parks and Raymond James Stadium.

"This particular tax cures, or at least takes care of, those problems for many years to come," then-Tampa mayor Dick Greco told voters.

But that was before record suburban growth eroded the school district's share of the tax proceeds.

In just the last five years, developers have built 140,000 new homes - almost as many as were built during the entire 1990s. To keep up, the school district has been forced to steer a greater proportion of its money toward school construction, mostly in New Tampa and southern and northwestern Hillsborough.

In dollar terms, that's an increase from five years ago of \$364.7-million, which is almost the exact size of the school district's building deficit.

The problem is compounded by the state's class-size reduction law, which requires schools to create smaller classes by 2010.

"We have to look for some other sources (of money), or look at building a wall across the northern part of the county so people can't move in," jokes board member Jack Lamb. "It's truly unbelievable."

The School Board is expected tonight to approve its five-year building plan, and the \$364-million deficit it predicts.

So far, school leaders have been silent on what to do about the shortfall.

While Florida's growth management laws can't stop development from going forward because there aren't enough schools, board members have not pursued even the modest remedies allowed by state law.

They haven't pressured county officials to delay approval of projects, as Orange County officials did, until there are enough schools to accommodate new occupants.

Nor have they sought to raise impact fees on builders, though the current fee is one of the lowest in the state. Three other Tampa Bay area counties - Citrus, Hernando and Pasco - all raised school impact fees this year,

and officials in those counties say growth has never been stronger.

During the next five years, Hillsborough expects to need at least 41 new schools. That's what is prompting the specter of double sessions and year-round schools.

In March, Olson wrote a letter to the County Commission asking for a meeting to discuss how to raise money for schools. Those discussions fizzled.

Meanwhile, school officials have accomplished little. Former county commissioner Jan Platt says this is partly because of what she considers a curious ambivalence.

"If the School Board spoke in strong terms about the plight of the school system, it would be more difficult for the commissioners to refuse a hike in impact fees," she says. "But they haven't done that."

**Instead, they are talking about another sales tax.**

Sales taxes generally hit poor people the hardest because it takes a greater percentage of their income. And many can't afford high-end services such as lawn care, legal fees and dry cleaning, all of which are exempt from the tax.

That's one reason other high-growth counties have turned to impact fees, which they say more fairly pay the costs of growth by charging those who cause it. Builders say impact fees only raise home prices, making it harder for struggling families to afford a house.

Impact fees can't be raised without the approval of the County Commission. Its members oppose an increase even though the fee of \$196 per single-family home has remained unchanged since 1989. At its current level, the fee pays for one new school every five years.

Jim Hamilton, the school district's chief of staff, says the School Board isn't going to try to sway commissioners on the issue.

"If we're going to expend political capital, I'd hate to do it on a revenue source that doesn't raise enough money," Hamilton says of impact fees.

But Orange County increased its school impact fee this year from \$2,800 to \$7,000 per single-family home. If Hillsborough charged that much, the fee would have generated \$80-million last year - the same amount that Hamilton says the sales tax would raise.

Hamilton says a dramatic increase in impact fees would chase development to other counties, such as Pasco and Hernando.

"Our School Board wants a growing community," Hamilton says. "It creates economic opportunity."

That's exactly what builders say when they speak against impact fees. Growth, they say, means prosperity.

But Orange County in the 1990s saw uncontrolled growth as a threat and a drain on revenue. County officials, led by then-County Chairman and current U.S. Sen. Mel Martinez, did something about it.

In 2000, Martinez instructed his staff to deny residential projects if they were proposed for areas without enough schools.

The move worked, says Dennis Foltz, a senior director of planning with the Orange County school district. Now developers either donate land or money for school construction, or they wait, Foltz said.

"Waiting is key, because time is money," Foltz says. "But it allows us to get a school in place. If we didn't have this, they'd get the permits a year before and we'd have overcrowding."

The school year is less than a week old, but Hillsborough officials already are predicting at least one-third of their campuses will be at or over capacity this year.

On Monday, Elia took the school district's plight before the Hillsborough City-County Planning Commission. She used one example to explain how the school system has tried with great difficulty to keep up with growth.

One year after Sessums Elementary opened in Riverview, it was at 120 percent of its capacity. So school leaders fast-tracked nearby Collins Elementary, which opened this fall, even though construction will not be finished for several months.

On the first day of school, Collins was only 200 children shy of being at its maximum capacity of 1,000 students.

Said Elia to commissioners: "We have a serious problem in the county."

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