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new facilities

Schools Dig Deep As Land Costs Rise

Polk district spent an average of \$59,090 per acre on property this year.

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The Ledger

LAKELAND -- The soaring price of real estate is forcing the Polk County School District to dig deeper to buy land for new schools.

The board recently offered \$12.2 million for 154 acres next to Wagner Elementary in Southwest Lakeland. The land -- 53 acres for a new middle school and 101 acres for a new high school -- costs more than \$80,000 an acre.

That's an increase of 470 percent from the price of \$13,750 per acre paid five years ago for the Wagner site on Yates Road. The district purchased those 25 acres for \$343,750.

Bob Williams, district assistant superintendent of facilities and operations, said high land costs are built into the district's massive school construction budget.

For example, the new southwest Lakeland high school has a budget of \$50 million, which is \$5 million more than the budget for a new high school to be built off of Saddle Creek Road.

The difference in the budgets is the difference between the sites' prices.

The property off Yates Road will cost \$81,436 per acre for 101 acres, or \$8.23 million. The Saddle Creek Road site between Lakeland and Auburndale cost the district \$28,227 per acre for 142 acres, or \$4 million total.

Over the next five years, Polk schools will spend about \$450 million of sales tax and impact fee revenue to build 12 new schools and more than 400 new classrooms and carry out 100 renovations at existing schools.

So far this year, the district has spent \$26 million to buy 442 acres, an average of \$59,090 per acre, for seven pieces of property.

Six of the seven are sites for schools slated to open in 2009 and 2010.

In the last four years, the district paid an average of \$22,727 per acre -- a total of \$6.5 million -- for



A bulldozer sits on the future site of Elementary School "J" to be built off Lakeland Highlands Road in south Lakeland. PIERRE DuCHARME/The Ledger

242 acres for seven new schools and property at Haines City High.

Because of the half-cent sales tax and increased school impact fees, the district, for the first time, has the means to buy land before a school is desperately needed in an area, Williams said.

Fifty million dollars has been set aside for the purchase of land over the next five years, for future use.

If a good piece of property comes up during a site search, the district will probably buy it and bank it until a school is needed, Williams said.

This year, for instance, district officials were looking for an elementary school site north of Davenport. Polk needs about 25 acres for the school. But another 95 acres was available. The district decided to buy the 95 acres at \$68,000 an acre because the location is in a high-growth area, Williams said.

The school district isn't the only buyer snatching up land for future use, said Gene Engle, a Lakeland realtor and developer. Commercial and residential developers are also looking for good sites.

"Now that (the district) has money, they're going to buy up all the school sites as quick as they can, realizing it will get less and less available," he said.

LAND LIMITS

Part of the reason for the steep prices paid by the school district is that it is required to buy high-quality land.

School districts are limited by state and federal regulations as to where they can build schools. For example, schools can't be under an airport's flight path or near a major railroad or power line grid, Williams said.

School land also has to be high and dry, out of flood plains and with minimal wetlands. It also can't be land that's been mined for phosphate or other materials and reclaimed for development, he said.

Those factors, combined with the availability of infrastructure, such as water, sewer and power lines, drive land prices higher, Engle said.

"The large tracts needed for schools are becoming extremely difficult to find," he said.

Land was especially difficult to find for the new high school slated to open for the 2010-11 school year in southwest Lakeland. District officials went through the selection process twice before settling on a 101-acre tract off Yates Road.

And still there are problems with the site because some nearby residents don't want a noisy high school compounding traffic problems on Yates Road.

The School Board won't sign off on the site until at least November, after residents have a chance to voice their concerns at a committee meeting later this month.

SLOW PROCESS

Part of the district's frustration is that the competing housing and commercial developers can sometimes move faster to acquire a site, said Sally Myers, the district's property management analyst.

Every piece of land the district considers buying goes through a rigorous committee process and in-depth analysis before the School Board and the local city officials or county commissioners approve the purchase. The process usually takes several months.

Myers cited one example of a prime piece of property in east Polk that had six other private offers before the School Board approved its purchase.

"If (the owner) hadn't preferred to have a school there, she could have sold it at any time," Myers said.

The district may get some help finding land with a law going into effect in 2008 that will require developers to consider the impact of new housing on schools, as the law already requires for sewer, water lines and roads.

Williams said the law won't make it easier to find land in already densely developed areas, like Lakeland, but it will help in growing areas, such as Four Corners.

Williams said he hopes the law will encourage large developments to donate 20-30 acres for an elementary, or more for a middle or high school.

Avatar Properties already donated 40 acres in the Poincianna area for a new K-8 school, which should open next August. Myers said the company is considering another donation in the near future.

The difficulty with land donations, Engle said, is that it's hard for smaller developers to break even. Developers have to spread the cost of the donation over the rest of the properties, which drives prices even higher, he said.

But School Board member Frank O'Reilly said a new school will increase property value anyway. He's pushing for county and city officials to jumpstart the 2008 law and require concurrency with schools now.

"How can you build a house without a classroom for the kids?" he asked.

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