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Schools' impact fees still in limbo

By Jeff Schmucker

County commissioners are split on whether to allow the school district to collect impact fees next year or wait for roughly another year to do so pending the results of a fee study.

Both of those options are also pending commissioners' decision on whether they wish to levy impact fees at all following last year's moratorium, which set the fees at zero.

During a joint meeting between the Hernando County School Board and county commission on Tuesday, it was determined that county commissioners would make their decision on the matter during their Nov. 13 meeting.

Also to be decided is whether the county can fund the school district impact fee study, which is expected to cost between \$60,000 and \$70,000 and take six to nine months to complete.

An impact fee is a one-time charge on new development to help pay for county roads, parks and other infrastructure.

County commissioners John Druzbeck and Jeff Stabins voiced their preference of setting the school district impact fee rate to 2001 levels of \$2,406 for a single family home — little more than half of the \$4,265 rate determined in the 2005 impact fee study.

They agreed with School Board member Dianne Bonfield's assertion that it would be almost a year for the district to receive any much-needed revenues from the fees to pay off debt and begin preparing for an eventual increase in student enrollment.

She said the district has improved from how it used to be, after having built six schools in 12 years. However, Bonfield added, the district could quickly fall behind population growth if school and county officials weren't careful.

"I taught during the times when it was good enough to drag in portables," Bonfield said. "I don't want to go back to the days when we couldn't keep up with growth."

However, Commission Chairman Wayne Dukes and Commissioner David Russell agreed they would prefer to see updated data from the new impact fee study, which they argued would be more defensible from any legal challenges.

Their opinions more closely mirrored that of school board Vice Chairman Matt Foreman and school board member John Sweeney.

Despite Duke's position on the matter, he sided with the school board's request for the county to pick up the tab for the impact fee study rather than the district.

However, the deciding vote on the issue now falls on County Commissioner Jim Adkins, who had to leave halfway through the workshop due to a family emergency.

Commissioners then opted to have staff present the impact fee options during the next scheduled meeting.

Last November, county commissioners approved a one-year moratorium to suspend all impact fees. Initially, commissioners were looking to lower impact fees across the board to 1999 levels rather than the 2001 levels they had set a year prior.

Commissioners argued during that time they needed to do more to bolster the economy and were met with applause from a crowd of builders and Greater Hernando County Chamber of Commerce members in the audience.

During the Nov. 13 meeting, commissioners will decide whether to allow the moratorium to expire — which would bring back impact fees to 2005 levels automatically — set new impact fee rates or issue another moratorium and again not collect any fees.

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