

Orlando Sentinel

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Seminole County considers raising its school impact fees

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October 26, 2005

SANFORD -- School impact fees in Seminole County are the lowest in the Central Florida, but that could change soon.

The school district took the first steps toward raising the fees Tuesday night by putting out a call for a consultant to help come up with a new figure.

The current charge of \$1,384 added to the cost of a single-family home has not changed since 1992. Nearby school districts charge as much as \$9,708 for a similar home.

"We have a target painted on us because we are so low," School Board member Barry Gainer said.

The combination of the best schools in the region and the lowest impact fees in the area make Seminole County a developer's dream, Gainer said. As a result, the schools are becoming increasingly crowded and district officials are pinched to come up with cash for more classrooms, he said.

A consultant, to be selected next month, will look at impact fees and other sources of money for school construction, Deputy Superintendent George Kosmac said. An additional half-cent sales tax and a bond issue also may be considered.

Although no figure has been settled upon, quadrupling the school impact fee to \$5,536 for a single-family home has been suggested. Annual revenue from impact fees would jump from about \$3.5 million a year to \$14 million -- enough for the district to build an elementary school.

Seminole's student enrollment increases by about 1,400 students a year -- enough to fill two elementary schools.

Impact fees for mobile and multifamily homes, which are substantially lower than those for single-family dwellings, also would be increased.

The Seminole County Commission would have to approve any increases in school impact fees. To

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persuade commissioners -- and to fend off legal challenges by development groups -- the district first needs a study documenting how new homes are increasing demands on the schools.

Higher fees in Osceola, Polk and Volusia counties all are being challenged. Seminole school officials are trying to win over local developers by including them in early decision-making on new impact fees.

Developers and other business people serve on an advisory committee studying school-construction needs. Seminole's top-rated public schools are key to luring new businesses and solid middle-class residents to the county, and money for classroom construction is needed, they agree.

"My sense is that everyone, including real-estate developers like myself, accepts the fact that impact fees have to be a part of it," said Jim Pelloni, a Lake Mary developer on the committee.

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