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Published Tuesday, July 12, 2005

Study: Raise Impact Fees 446%

Paper finds current amount too low for new-school needs.

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The Ledger

BARTOW -- Polk County's aspiring homeowners would have to shell out more than five times the current school impact fee if county commissioners adopt a consultant's recommendation.

Fees for apartments and mobile homes would also rise dramatically.

The consultant's study ordered by commissioners suggested upping the impact fee on new houses from the current \$1,607 for a single-family home to \$8,767, an increase of \$7,160 -or 446 percent.

If the consultant's plan is adopted in full, fees for new multi-family homes, such as apartments or duplexes, would go from \$832 to \$5,831 per unit, an increase of \$4,999 -- or 601 percent. Mobile homes' fees would be hiked from \$802 to \$4,677, an increase of \$3,875 -or 483 percent.

School Board member Frank O'Reilly urged county commissioners to adopt the fees and do it soon so Polk can begin catching up on new school construction forced by growth.

"Everybody in this county, everybody in this state says growth has to pay for itself," O'Reilly said. "I think it's time."

But county commissioners Monday weren't ready to commit to the full increases that were recommended.

The increased fees could bring in as much as \$50 million more a year for new school construction, said Bob Williams, the School District's assistant superintendent of facilities and operations.

Last year, Polk collected a little more than \$9.8 million for schools in new home fees. At its current rate, the district expects to receive \$51.1 million total in school impact fees over the next five years.

But the new study said that the district will need much more to provide every student a classroom seat.

The report projects at least 95,264 students in Polk classrooms by the 2009-10 school year, up by about 8,000 students from this fall. The already overcrowded district will need to build the equivalent of 12 new elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school in the next five years.

School Fee Hike Proposed 

A consultant hired by the Polk County Commission has recommended a steep increase in impact fees on new construction used to pay for schools:

HOUSING TYPE	CURRENT	PROP.
Single family	\$1,607	\$8,767
Multi-family (per unit)	832	5,381
Mobile home	802	4,677

SOURCE: Henderson, Young & Company, July 11, 2005



Even with the additional dollars, O'Reilly said he's not sure the fee increases can pay for all the growth in Polk.

"I don't know if it's enough, but it'll certainly be a big improvement over what we have now," O'Reilly said.

The \$40,000 study by Randy Young, of Redmond, Wash., firm Henderson, Young & Co., was ordered by county commissioners earlier this year. Young turned in his preliminary report to county officials last week.

County commissioners approved the current impact fee of \$1,607 for a single-family home in 2003. It was considerably less than the \$3,801 fee recommended in another study by Young, who also wrote the 2003 report.

The district began collecting the fee in September 2003.

Now, most members of the County Commission agree they need to raise school impact fees, which pay for building new classrooms, buildings and schools.

"I definitely think the impact fee needs to be adjusted," said Commissioner Sam Johnson. "But by what percent and all, I just don't know."

Before commissioners start to consider any impact fees, they go through an advisory committee that analyzes the data and methodology of the study. Young will make changes before the final report goes to commissioners in the fall.

The advisory committee will meet Wednesday to review the latest fee suggestion.

Commissioner Bob English said he was initially shocked by the size of the recommended increases.

"I campaigned on the promise to make growth pay for itself," he said. "But at the same time, we want to keep Polk County business-friendly and make sure the impact fees aren't a deterrent."

Commissioners Randy Wilkinson and Jack Myers expressed reservations about adopting the much higher school fee.

Myers, who voted against the impact fee in 2003, said impact fees are unfair because the burden of growth is shouldered solely by new homes.

Myers favors other measures to pay for growth, such as rental fees. "That way, everyone would pay," he said.

Wilkinson said he has nothing against impact fees. But he said he'd prefer to max out fees for new roads instead of schools.

The class-size reduction amendment, passed by Florida voters in 2002, will require school districts in the state to build numerous new classrooms and it played a large role in creating the new \$8,767 fee recommendation.

But Wilkinson said he thinks the class-size requirement will go before voters again and this time they will vote it down, thus eliminating the need for a higher fee.

In the new study, Young considered growth, along with the rising cost of construction, increased land prices and class-size limitations.

Money collected from a halfpercent sales tax increase, approved by Polk voters in May 2003, also was factored in. But because that money is used largely for school improvements and not new schools, it did not significantly influence the suggested fee, Young said in an email to county officials last week.

Out of the \$125 million expected from sales tax revenue in the next five years, only \$28.8 million, or 23 percent, is earmarked for added capacity because of growth, the report says.

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