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Study school deficit from all angles

A Times Editorial

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No one needs another study committee to realize new residents do not cover the costs for adding thousands of students to Hillsborough's school system every year. Commissioners and School Board members who inhale developers' campaign donations at election time showed they favor special interests over the public interest by choosing to study, not increase, the lowest school impact fee in the state.

At \$196 per new home, Hillsborough's fee guarantees two things. School construction money will not keep pace with growth, and the burden for the ballooning debt will continue to shift to existing residents. School officials say many options, including double sessions, are on the table to close a \$364-million construction gap. While the focus is school capacity, a fix must address larger issues, from tax fairness and attendance zones to growth management.

If they achieve nothing else, the panel's co-chairs, Commissioner Tom Scott and School Board member Jack Lamb, should underscore that every level of local government has a stake in providing adequate classroom space. Decent schools are essential for communities to grow and diversify. Hillsborough also emerged from federal court supervision on the promise it would expand opportunities for students to attend a school of one's choice. Limiting those options merely because the school district lacks the courage to support higher taxes shows bad faith to the federal courts, poor families and minorities.

Before the committee fixes on a magic number, it should first establish the fee is inadequate, attempt to get the developers on board and scrub the district's work plan for any inefficiencies. The next step toward narrowing the deficit gap should be to reassign students to underused campuses. The committee should also frame some political realities. The schools may need a sales tax hike to bridge the gap, but voters first will want to see the development community do its part. Voters also want to see the School Board act as stronger advocates for what should be done. On that score, Lamb, in particular, has the authority and demeanor to bring forward some solid proposals.

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