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Study set to weigh school impact fee

School Board members want to determine whether a jump above the current \$7,608 is justified.

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KISSIMMEE -- The Osceola School District has ordered a study to determine whether rising construction costs should lead to adjustments in the county's school impact fee.

The work, which could take three months, is expected to justify an increase in the current \$7,608 fee added to every new single-family home's price tag by weighing, among other factors, rising costs for land and construction.

That amount, challenged in court by the Home Builders Association of Metro Orlando, was lowered in December from \$9,708 after a judge granted the group a tax credit. Fees vary for multifamily housing.

"I'm sure it will go up, because the cost of construction has gone up," said School Board Chairman Thomas Chalifoux Jr. "It costs more to build a high school today than it did last year."

By a 5-0 vote, board members chose Henderson Young & Co., a Redmond, Wash. consulting firm specializing in impact fees, to draft the \$47,000 study. The firm has done previous studies for the district. Impact fees are subject to review every three years or so but can only be approved and levied by the County Commission.

Randy Young, president of Henderson Young & Co., said he will rely heavily on methodology from a 2003 study, which district officials then used to tell the county how large an impact fee should be charged on every new home built in Osceola. Also in 2003, the last time the county voted on the school fee, county commissioners approved estimates provided by the school district without modifications.

Young, who is also expected to help the county and school district devise a plan that would tie future growth to the availability of classrooms, said that a lawsuit from builders on the new fees was "unlikely"

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this time.

"We will be using the methodology adopted by the latest court ruling," said Young. "And since nobody has appealed that decision, I would think it unlikely that somebody will have a reason to challenge."

But William Hyde, Tallahassee attorney for the home builders who sued the county, was not so quick to agree.

"Even if they follow methodology, there still could be challenges," said Hyde. "There's all sorts of ways of overestimating costs."

Home builders have argued in the past that impact fees benefit everyone at the expense of new home buyers and that high fees may hamper sales.

The school district, meanwhile, says it can afford to build only 17 of the 32 schools it projects will be needed during the next 10 years to help house the estimated 86,856 students the district will have then. And although impact fees have helped pay for construction, they don't come close to covering capital expenses, district officials argue. Building a single high school, they say, now costs about \$45 million.

"We look at it from a lot of different viewpoints," Chalifoux said. "We not only have to build new schools, but we have to upgrade existing schools and, as it is, impact fees aren't paying for growth."

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