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Superintendent Opposes Suspending School Impact Fee

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SEBRING — The Highlands County School Board will ask the Highlands County commissioners not to suspend the school impact fee.

In about two weeks, the commissioners will vote on Commissioner Guy Maxcy's plan to suspend impact fees for six months as the linchpin of a county effort to stimulate the local home building industry.

The county assesses eight impact fees to provide infrastructure that will be needed due to growth. Running the gamut from road and school construction to more parks, sewers and jail cells, the eight impact fees total \$7,600 for a new home that costs \$200,000 to build.

Superintendent Wally Cox said Thursday that he and the school board definitely will object to either suspending or reducing the impact fee for the schools. Cox said school officials will put their opposition in writing and send it to the county commissioners.

The school system has borrowed money for building projects and has promised the lender that it has three revenue streams to pay off the debt, Cox said. One of those is the school impact fee, he said.

Suspension of the fee, even for six months, would harm the school district's ability to finance pending or planned school projects, Cox added.

Maxcy has spearheaded the temporary suspension of impact fees to make a new home affordable for some prospective homeowners.

At the March 18 county commission meeting, Commissioner Don Bates called for a vote to suspend the eight impact fees. The vote had to be delayed since county Attorney Ross Macbeth said a public hearing was needed before the vote, and the hearing had to be advertised in advance.

This coming week, Macbeth is expected to have the advertisement in place and commissioners can announce the date for the public hearing and their vote on the impact fee suspension.

Fate Of School Impact Fee

It appears doubtful that county commissioners will suspend the school impact fee if the school board takes a strong stand against that move.

At the March 18 commissioners meeting, Commissioner Barbara Stewart said she would not vote on suspending the impact fee until she knows how school officials feel about it.

Another issue is the school impact fee's size. Of the eight impact fees, the school impact fee is the largest. Suspending the seven smaller impact fees but keeping the largest would dilute the the impact of waiving them.

Cox added that while the school board has not taken an official stand on the issue, he has no doubt that school officials, like himself, will strongly object to any suspension of the school impact fee.

Plan B?

At the March 18 meeting, Rick Helms, the assistant county administrator, said if impact fees are waived, county officials will have to come up with some other way to raise tax revenues for infrastructure needs caused by growth.

State law requires each county to set aside revenue to cover infrastructure needs for every new house, apartment, condo unit, retail, commercial and industrial building. If impact fees are waived and the county doesn't raise tax revenue to replace them, Helms said, the state could prevent Highlands County from issuing building permits.

Helms, as well as county Administrator Carl Cool, said there is no question that, under state law, the county must raise revenue to pay for growth-related infrastructure. The only question is who will pay that cost: People building new homes and buildings or the taxpayers who already live or do business here?

Cox noted in his Thursday interview with Highlands Today that the school impact fee is charged only to residential structures and not to commercial, retail or industrial buildings, since those projects do not generate more students for the school system.


The main goal in waiving impact fees is to jump start the home building industry, Maxcy said. But whatever commissioners decide, he and Bates have said a decision needs to be made soon.

"If we're going to stimulate the economy, we have to do something soon," Bates said.

In addition to impact fees, Maxcy has also proposed a temporary suspension of other county fees for construction projects, including building permit fees, landfill dumping charges for construction debris, site plan review and the permit to build a driveway.

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