

Teachers hope to rally opposition to fee cuts

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NEW PORT RICHEY - Teachers understand pressure. Imagine standing in front of a group of eight graders preparing for a major algebra exam.

Teachers in Pasco County say they face the pressure of getting the public to understand the complex issue of impact fees in less than two weeks.

The impact fee cram session comes as Pasco County Commissioners are set to cut impact fees by half on April 19.

Impact fees are paid by home builders to help fund school construction. In Pasco County, the fee tops \$8,000. It will but cut by 50 percent.

Although the fees are used to pay for new school construction, teachers say a complex set of budget rules force the school district to pay the debt on the 22 schools built in the last seven years first. Those schools were constructed because of the housing boom that brought thousands of new students into the district.

"The rules say pay the bankers before the kids, before the teachers," said Lynne Webb, president of the United School Employees of Pasco. "Unfortunately what that means is that source of revenue to pay our debts now will have to come out of our operating budget."

Operating budgets pay teacher salaries and teachers fear massive layoffs because of impact fee cuts on top of \$60-million worth of project cuts from the state.

the USEP hopes it can rally public support against cutting impact fees before the April 19th County Commission vote.

"If enough people will express to them their concerns, maybe they will put the needs of the children ahead of the desires of the developers."

Jim Deitch of Southern Crafted Homes insists "...this has never been about building more homes; it's about creating and preserving jobs.

He suggests even in a bad economy people are buying homes. The catch: It's got to be at the right price.

"If you look at Hillsborough County, where the vast majority of the construction is going on, you're going to find those homes are about \$10,000 less with the same square footage."

Deitch suggests the proof is in the permits. Where impact fees are lower, more homes are being built.

"There were 31 permits pulled two weeks ago in Hillsborough County. During that same period, there were only five pulled in Pasco County."

All five Pasco County Commissioners indicate they will vote in favor of a cut in impact fees.