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St. Petersburg Times
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April 6, 2011

Why is Pasco putting roads before children?

By Times Wire

Pasco commissioners are more concerned about motorists than schoolchildren. As a result, they are preparing to cut by half the education impact fee assessed on new residential construction while finding new revenue to pay for transportation. It's an imbalance skewed by the commission's reluctance to cross a building industry pushing the flawed logic that fee cuts will spur new home building.

The expected outcome, after public hearings and votes later this spring, will be an impact fee cut to \$2,400 per single-family home for school construction, but a \$6,000 per-home fee and future property tax revenue growth earmarked exclusively for transportation under a so-called mobility fee. It is a disparity that will unfairly burden schools.

This week, after discussions with School Board members and the public on Monday and among themselves on Tuesday, commissioners agreed to halve the school impact fee even though there is no empirical data to support the contention it will stimulate the local economy through renewed home construction.

Absent hard evidence, commissioners relied on anecdotes and metaphors. "You don't have anything to lose," said home builder Alex Deeb. Commissioner Ann Hildebrand called it a "shot in the dark" and a gamble. Yes, but with no winners. Public policy shouldn't be so heavy on risk when the reward is undetectable.

Commissioner Jack Mariano, who champions the fee cut, has recalled wistfully 2006 as a time to emulate for the local economy. He fails to mention unbridled development and overbuilding - not too mention dubious lending practices and investor-driven inflationary pricing - helped burst the real estate bubble and trigger a prolonged recession.

In the meantime, the Pasco School District spent \$300 million on new schools to handle a booming student population, with only a third of the cost covered by impact fees.

When Mariano first broached an across-the-board fee cut in February, Commissioners Ted Schrader and Pat Mulieri wanted to protect the county's nearly \$10,000-per-home fee for road construction. As an alternative, the county expedited its mobility fee as a hedge against a drop-off in transportation dollars.

There is no such safeguard afforded the Pasco school district. It is unfortunate and the snub is magnified by a projected \$60 million school budget shortfall due to expiring federal stimulus money, declining property values, reduced state aid and the inability to repeat one-time allocations as a stopgap.

Builders like to point out that Pasco is one of the few counties not to reduce its impact fees, but little is said about other counties that recognize the value of adequate school construction funding. Polk County did not include school fees in its reduction and St. Johns County commissioners voted in March to increase its education fee.

That should be the role model for the Pasco commission, which is unwilling to acknowledge that strong public schools with sufficient classrooms are an imperative part of marketing new houses to families.

What is the value of money for a better road network if it leads to an elementary school campus stacked with portable classrooms?

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