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It's up to school board, not council to set impact fee levels

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The Olympia City Council and the Olympia School Board are a bit at odds over how much the school district should collect in impact fees on new homes.

Staff members for the city and school district are meeting in hopes of working out an agreement.

City Council members must understand that it's up to the school board to set the amount of money to be collected to offset the impacts of growth. It's a school board decision, not a council decision.

The level of impact fees agreed to by the school board should merely be ratified by the City Council.

Councilwoman Rhenda Strub has tried to insert herself and her opinion into the discussion. She said the City Council should reject the school board's request to drop the impact fees to \$659 per new single-family home — a dramatic 84 percent reduction from 2009 levels.

Strub called the proposed reduction in fees “laughable.”

What she does not seem to understand is that the school board cannot set its impact fees willy-nilly. The fees the school board assesses on new homes must be related to the district's plans to accommodate growth. And right now, the school board has no major growth-related plans in the works. So, school board members cannot assess a higher fee.

Superintendent Bill Lahmann notes that the Olympia School District has recently added student capacity at Capital High School, Washington Middle School and Pioneer Elementary School. Higher impact fees were assessed and used to accommodate that growth.

For example, Lahmann said, about half of the \$2 million to add classroom space at Pioneer came from impact fees.

School impact fees can only be used to increase student capacity. With no major expansion plans in the works, the school district is putting together a long range facilities plan which will look at school boundaries, demographics and anticipated growth. “We can't build new schools in anticipation of growth that may or may not materialize,” Lahmann said.

For example, there are a couple of new housing developments proposed for the mostly wooded area between Boulevard and Wiggins roads. More than 1,000 new homes may be built.

But that's speculation. Plans have not been approved and no building permits have been issued. Who knows how long it will take the economy to rebound to the point where new subdivisions are added. The school district cannot build a new elementary school just because developers might build new homes — someday.

Lahmann admits that Centennial and McKenny elementary schools are full, but there's extra room at Madison Elementary. Even with the capacity problems at Centennial and McKenny, there aren't enough students to warrant a new elementary school on the east side, Lahmann said.

The reduction in impact fees to \$659 for a single-family residence may well be a single-year occurrence, Lahmann said. If the economy miraculously rebounds and new homes are quickly filled with additional students, then the school district will face capacity issues that will warrant higher impact fees.

But the school district isn't at that point today.

School officials, not City Council members, are responsible for studying student capacity issues and setting impact fee levels. The Olympia City Council should butt out.