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## **Large Fee Hike Likely To Pass**

**Majority on panel say they'll support increase that fulfills class-size mandate.**

By [Julia Crouse](#)

The Ledger

HAINES CITY -- A majority of Polk's county commissioners pledged their support Friday to increase the school impact fee for new homes by nearly 435 percent.

If the County Commission votes to raise Polk's school impact fee from \$1,607 to the proposed \$8,596, the county will have the second-highest school impact fee in the state, behind Osceola County's \$9,708.

The commissioners met with the School Board on Friday for the fourth annual Interlocal Government Meeting and an informational session with Randy Young, the consultant who recommended the higher impact fee.

Commissioners Paul Senft, Bob English and Sam Johnson told School Board members they would vote to increase the impact fee to \$8,596 to build new schools.

Commissioner Randy Wilkison said he opposed the large impact fee increase because it includes funds to help Polk meet the state's class size requirement -- a measure Wilkinson says is solely the state's responsibility to fund.

"It's the responsibility of the state and not the local school district," he said. "I think if we start trying to do the unattainable, we may take the responsibility and accountability off of the state Legislature."

Commissioner Jack Myers seemed supportive of the increase but didn't specifically voice a promise of support Friday.

"We're all talking about what's best for Polk County. But why don't you all . . . run the school system that way?" he asked School Board members, suggesting that they should ignore the class-size legislation if it doesn't have high penalties.

The state has a history of failing to pay for its mandates, said School Board member Frank O'Reilly. The only way the district will be able to comply with the class size amendment, passed by Florida voters in 2002, will be through impact fees.

"In this county, every individual wants a quality education for our children," O'Reilly said. "To say the state's supposed to pay for it but won't, so we're going to shortchange our children, doesn't make any sense to me."

Eliminating class-size funding would lower the impact fee to less than \$2,900, Young has estimated.

According to Young's calculations, it will cost Polk almost \$300 million to build enough permanent classrooms -- 13,899 student stations -- to handle growth during the next five years. The student stations include everything necessary for one student in a school, such as classrooms, seats, science labs and music rooms.

That \$300 million doesn't include the more than 1,123 student stations Polk is short right now.

So far, the state has given Polk \$30 million toward class size reduction -- or about 10 percent of the total bill, Young said.

"The days of expecting very much back from Tallahassee are over and gone," Senft said.

But if commissioners pass the higher fee, they want to revise the fee if the district receives any more money from the state. That means, if the School Board gets another few million dollars for class size reduction, the impact fee would go down.

If the commission doesn't increase the impact fee, it would mean double sessions for every Polk County school, said Bob Williams, district assistant superintendent of facilities and operations.

"It's the only way to meet the (class size) requirements," he said after the meeting.

Previously, Polk has only gone to double sessions in emergency situations such as a natural disaster or if a new school wasn't completed on time, Williams said.

School Board members say the extra cash is needed to build schools for thousands of new students enrolling in Polk schools. Prior to the opening of school, the district was expecting 87,437 students by the 60th day of school in October. It now appears enrollment could top 90,000 by that date, a 7 percent increase over the 60th-day number last year.

The district is in the third year of a 15-year, \$650 million construction program, but school officials say that's not enough.

The half-cent sales tax, passed by Polk voters in 2003, already is tapped out to renovate Polk's oldest schools and to build new classrooms for growth and class size restrictions.

The revenue from impact fees, which may be used only for new construction, would pay for the county's growth and its class size compliance.

The county's Impact Fee Advisory Committee will make a recommendation to the commissioners about the amount of the school impact fee.

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