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Orange, Seminole boost fees for schools

Commissions in both counties OK steep increases in impact fees on new homes.

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Home builders in Orange and Seminole counties will have to chip in more to build schools starting early next year.

County commissioners in Orange and Seminole voted Tuesday afternoon to raise fees that are charged against new homes to help pay for new classrooms. The vote was unanimous in Orange. An increase passed by a narrow 3-2 margin in Seminole.

Orange's new impact fee of \$11,829 for a single-family home -- up sharply from the current \$7,000 -- will be the highest in the state. But commissioners agreed it is needed to improve the county's schools. Some have been getting poor grades from the state in recent years, and officials say crowded and aged buildings are partly to blame.

"It's a fair fee," said School Board Chairwoman Karen Ardaman.

Orange's school district, the 11th-largest in the nation, has struggled to fit 174,000 students into its 174 schools, many needing major repairs.

Commissioners in both counties sidestepped concerns that the fee increases will worsen an already-ailing housing market.

"You can't sell homes in a community with failing schools," said Commissioner Bill Segal.

Seminole's school-impact fees will rise to \$5,000 on Feb. 1 but will remain the lowest in the region. The impact fee of \$1,384 hasn't changed since it was first approved in 1992.

School-district officials reminded county commissioners that Seminole's schools are among the best in the state, attracting people and businesses as a result.

"The best thing the school district has done for you is to be one of the economic engines driving development in the county," School Board member Sandy Robinson told the commission.



With construction slowing, the current fee in Seminole raised only about \$1.5 million in the past year, compared with about \$3.5 million annually in previous years.

The total would more than triple under the new fee schedule and in a good year would generate enough to pay for a new elementary school.

Seminole Commissioners Brenda Carey and Michael McLean, who voted against the new fee, said they wanted a smaller increase. They agreed with critics who say higher impact fees price some people out of the housing market.

Other commissioners voted yes after school-district officials agreed to work out some kind of rebate for affordable housing.

Several supporters said rapid growth has chewed up school-construction money.

"Stop bleeding the other schools that are suffering because there are not enough dollars to support growth," said Deborah Turner of Lake Mary, who serves on a school system's business advisory board.

The Orlando Regional Realtor Association spoke against the increase. "Any additional money you add to the cost of a house is going to keep somebody from buying that house," said Frankie Elliott, association vice president.

In Orange County, school leaders brokered a last-minute truce with local home builders Tuesday afternoon, avoiding a legal fight that threatened to delay raising education-impact fees by 69 percent.

The School Board and home builders are at odds over how a sales tax for school construction approved by voters in 2002 can be spent.

Instead of allowing that fight to delay the impact-fee increase -- which had already been delayed a month by county officials -- home builders and school leaders agreed to seek an opinion next year from the State Attorney General's Office on how Orange officials can spend sales taxes.

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