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School Board that the 32-percent increase in the school impact fee will mean taxpayers will pay for growth

County Commission compromises at 32% boost

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TAVARES

Lake County school officials expressed dismay Wednesday at county commissioners' late-night decision to raise school-impact fees by 32 percent, less than a third of what the district sought.

Tuesday night's decision could force the School Board to impose double sessions in crowded south Lake schools, the board's attorney and several members warned.

The County Commission compromise raises school-impact fees from \$7,055 for a new single-family home to \$9,324 instead of \$14,646, which would have been the highest fee in the state and the second-highest in the nation.

"We still have a [funding] gap," School Board Chairman Larry Metz said.

"I don't know what else we can do as a board."

The compromise, reached after a four-hour, deeply divided meeting, also was criticized Wednesday by impact-fee foes, who not only argued against an increase but also called for a roll-back.

"I don't think any increase was justified, but it's obviously more palatable than what they wanted," said Jean Kaminski, executive director of the Home Builders Association of Lake County.

Asked if the organization would challenge the increase in court, a route home builders have taken in other counties, Kaminski said she did not know.

"This has been a very difficult year," she said.

"I know a lot of us are just trying to enjoy the holidays with our families now."

Tuesday's meeting at the Lake County Administration Building drew an overflow crowd that appeared to be evenly divided.

Proponents of the fee increase wore red.



Opponents wore stickers with the international no symbol stamped across the words "Impact Fee Increase," and some waved signs that read, "Save Our Economy."

Fifty people addressed commissioners Tuesday, and many were applauded from one side of the room or the other.

Perhaps the most polarizing speaker was Andrew Arvesen, 38, a bow-tied teacher at Windy Hill Middle School who delivered his remarks with the passion of a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

He railed against developers.

"It is insulting and ridiculous for this group of profiteers to stand here and argue that they need government assistance," Arvesen said. "It is dishonest and laughable for them to pretend that they benefit our community. I was born here, have lived here for years, but I have yet to receive a single cent from their paving projects. They haven't improved the quality of life for me or any other permanent resident."

The folks in red roared their approval; impact-fee foes booed.

The tables turned when Carol Saviak spoke against the increase.

"Impact fees are not a magic bullet," said Saviak, executive director of the Orlando-based Coalition for Property Rights.

"There are those here tonight who have spoken and suggested that impact fees will build better communities or build better schools. . . . Higher taxes have never made any community a better place to live . . . "

The compromise was reached after Commissioners Welton Cadwell and Jennifer Hill announced that they would not vote for the larger, 107 percent increase.

The difference between the School Board's request and what it ended up with was borrowing costs.

School Board members wanted to charge new residents for interest costs that the district incurs to finance schools construction.

Cadwell and Hill said they were concerned that including borrowing costs could be illegal.

School Board member Cindy Barrow called that stand disappointing.

"I wish that two of our commissioners would've been a little more brave. More and more of our taxpayers' dollars are going toward debt services instead of building new schools for our students," Barrow said.

"I'm disappointed that we're not letting growth pay for itself."

Commissioners Elaine Renick and Linda Stewart supported the full fee. Commissioner Debbie Stivender, who recently began chemotherapy treatments for colon cancer, was absent.

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