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Pasco City Council adopts school impact fees

By Kristi Pihl, Tri-City Herald

A portion of the millions of dollars the Pasco School District needs to build classrooms to educate future students will come from a new \$4,700 building fee.

The Pasco City Council approved the school impact fees requested by the Pasco School District in a 4-2 vote Monday.

The district told the city that the fees are needed to help pay for facilities to house new students the new homes will bring.

In the next six years, the district expects enrollment to grow by 34 percent, from 15,600 students to more than 21,000.

But the district's total capacity is closer to 14,800 students based on existing school buildings and portable classrooms.

About 20 years ago, the public and council thought growth would slow down, but it didn't, said Pasco Mayor Pro Tem Rebecca Francik.

"To sit back and do nothing would be irresponsible," she said. "We know we have a problem."

Francik said she knows the fee means added costs for new homes in Pasco.

Builders and real estate agents have said the fees will price some families out of the market and slow growth.

But, "if we don't have more houses, we don't need more school buildings," Francik said.

The district asked for a \$4,683 fee for a single-family home and \$4,525 per unit in a multifamily project. The city increased the single-family home fee to \$4,700 to pay for the city's administration costs.

The fee is effective April 16, said Rick White, Pasco's community and economic development director. Builders and real estate agents asked for at least 30 days notice to allow projects and contracts in process to have time to finish without being affected by the fee.

Councilman Al Yenney, who voted against the fee along with Councilman Tom Larsen, said he feels the fees are contrary to property rights.

"It's the same thing as imposing a fee and going back in time," Yenney said. "I just don't think it is right."

Yenney said while he hopes he is wrong, he is afraid adding the fee will have a trickle-down effect beginning with cutting growth.

John Talbott of Pasco suggested instead passing an ordinance limiting the number of building permits issued each year, depending on what the school district could accommodate.

"If the schools can't accommodate the children, quit building houses," said Talbott, who ran for the council against Francik in the 2011 election.

While Talbott doesn't like the idea of limiting growth, he said it would be the responsible thing to do.

Limiting the number of building permits in that way wouldn't be legal, said Pasco City Manager Gary Crutchfield. And a moratorium on new homes wasn't an attractive idea to builders and developers, he said.

Councilman Saul Martinez said it is the community's responsibility to keep education a top priority. Having a strong school system is important when attracting businesses and industry, he said.

Chris Cargill, Washington Policy Center's Eastern Washington office director, said in a blog post Monday that school impact fees will depress the Pasco housing market without providing the resources needed to build new schools. The center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank.

He said the district needs to look at other options, such as getting the state to end the green building mandate, exploring public/private partnerships and year-round schools.

The district has looked at multitrack year-round schools, which are not the same as year-round schools, but school officials said they have been told by the public to leave that option as a last resort. While capacity would increase without adding new buildings, operation costs would grow too.

The council also approved an agreement with the district to set up the structure for the school impact fee in a 5-1 vote, with Yenney voting against it, and approved decreasing the length of time for a building permit to be issued, from six months to 30 days, in a 5-1 vote, with Yenney voting against the measure.

White said most building permits are issued within 10 to 15 days of the application being submitted.

The change is supposed to help minimize the changes that a developer could put in a large number of applications now to avoid the impact fee, White said.

But the council couldn't get five of the six members present to agree to the change starting today. Instead, it will go into effect in the next week.

The district wants to use about \$3.6 million from the impact fees to help pay for \$80.8 million in capital improvements -- two elementary schools, an early learning center and portables. Most of the money would come from voter-approved bonds and state matching money.

-- Kristi Pihl: 582-1512; kpahl@tricityherald.com