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Pasco schools bursting at the seams

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The Pasco School District cut in half the cost of proposed new schools and facilities it will need to teach new students in the next six years.

But the district says it still needs school impact fees on new homes to help pay for the space to house the coming wave of students.

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.

The district has told Pasco and Franklin County that enrollment growth has outstripped the district's ability to house new students.

On Tuesday, Pasco City Council will consider whether to adopt the district's 2011-17 capital facilities plan into the city's comprehensive plan.

Last week, City Manager Gary Crutchfield told the council that would be the same as supporting a school impact fee, although an ordinance still would be needed to implement one.

The fee suggested by the district's plan is \$4,683 for a single-family home and \$4,525 per unit in a multifamily project.

That's more than \$1,000 less than the district's previous proposal that drew sharp criticism from builders and developers who say extra fees are a barrier to growth and drive up home prices.

Room to grow

Creating enough space for 5,400 more students would mean five new schools, more portables and expanding 2-year-old Chiawana High School.

The district's current plan to deal with growth puts off building new middle schools by moving sixth-graders into the elementary schools, said John Morgan, the district's director of operations. Elementary schools cost less than middle schools.

The district has eliminated two middle schools from its six-year project list. Instead, the district proposes building four elementary schools and one early learning center for kindergartners.

Two elementary schools, the early learning center and portables would be included in phase one. The second phase would include the last two elementary schools, the high school expansion and more portables.

The cost of all the projects is about \$143 million, compared to \$311 million from the district's 2010-16 capital facilities plan.

Taking middle schools off the list for the next six years made the biggest difference in cost, Morgan said.

But the sixth-graders can't be moved until something is done to the current elementary schools because they don't have the room, he said.

Another change in the district's plan is making some portables permanent classrooms, even though state law considers them temporary, Morgan said.

Right now, 63 of the 80 portables at elementary schools are considered permanent by the district, according to the 2011-17 capital facilities plan.

At the middle schools, 20 of 48 portable classrooms are permanent; at the high schools, all 41 portables are permanent.

But a school's other facilities, such as the cafeteria, restrooms, office and library, are built to serve a certain number of students and can support only so many portables, Morgan said.

For example, there are three lunch sessions at McLoughlin Middle School, and the school might add a fourth to get all the students served quickly, he said.

McLoughlin and James McGee Elementary are getting to the point where the infrastructure simply can't handle more students, he said.

And in some places, the district is running out of room to put portables, Morgan said.

"We are getting to the stage where portables are no longer going to be a viable option," he said.

Multitrack, year-round school is an option the district is considering, but it isn't preferred. Many in the community have made it clear that should be a last option, he said.

This summer, the district will add 24 portables to keep from switching to multitrack, year-round school.

The fairness of fees

Most of the money for phase one would come from voter-approved bonds and state matching money. But the district plans to charge impact fees to get \$3.6 million of the needed \$80.8 million.

Because there is no school impact fee now, the district is asking the city and Franklin County to require developers to negotiate a payment when new subdivisions go through the State Environmental Policy Act and platting process.

The district must ask for the fee for each project and negotiate individually with each developer to set that amount.

The only other option is an ordinance that would automatically require impact fees on new home construction when building permits are issued.

Since the school district notified the city and county that it would ask developers for money from new subdivisions proposed in school district boundaries after April 1, 2011, the developers of two subdivisions -- one in the county and one in the city -- have negotiated with the school district as part of getting approval for their projects.

Stealth Development of Idaho is building Navigator Villas, a 47-lot subdivision on the southwest corner of Road 68 and Powerline Road. The project would have 46 fourplexes and two duplexes with 188 units.

The project is headed to the Pasco Planning Commission.

Franklin County hasn't received any applications for new subdivisions, said Jerrod MacPherson, county planning and building director.

Franklin County Commission Chairman Brad Peck said they had a number of concerns when the district first proposed the fees.

On the surface, a school impact fee appears unfair because the fee is applied whether a home actually brings new students to the district or not, he said. And when a new family moves into an existing home, the fee is not applied.

"I am a big proponent of strong healthy schools as an important part of any successful community," he said. But he has reservations about using impact fees to pay for them.

Low tax base

When new homes are built in Pasco, the district doesn't receive any more tax dollars.

For bonds and levies, the district only receives the amount approved by voters, Morgan said. If new development occurs, each taxpayer pays less, but the district doesn't get any more.

And the school district's tax base is extremely low in comparison to other districts, Morgan said.

The school district's per pupil assessed value, at \$311,000, is 271st out of the state's 295 school districts, according to the capital facilities plan.

Assessed value affects the district's bonding capacity, Morgan said. And it means the tax burden is higher on each taxpayer.

The district has suggested an impact fee based on a formula that uses the actual cost per dwelling unit for the portion of new schools that would serve new students, according to the district's plan.

Then, the fee was lowered based on expected state matching money and future property taxes from the new homes. Then the fee was discounted by 25 percent, Morgan said.

Even if a school impact fee is passed, it would have to be reevaluated every two years by law, Morgan said. And if the district can't justify a continued need for the amount, it could be discounted or removed.

If an impact fee is approved, it needs to be lower, said Rene Dahlgren, Home Builders Association of Tri-Cities director of government affairs. The proposed fee of about \$4,700 could push some homes out of the reach of buyers, and is more money for a builder to raise.

She said it would be better to have the fee charged when the house sells not at the building permit stage.

Rick White, Pasco's community and economic development director, said the city is looking at the idea, but the process is complicated, including having to assign liens against properties, and it's expensive with recording and release fees.

But the Home Builders Association feels impact fees are an unfair way to tax because they don't apply to all housing.

Pasco Mayor Pro Tem Rebecca Francik said she understands the argument that it would be more fair to have a fee on the sale of all new homes. "There is nothing the school district or the city can do about that," she said.

A school impact fee is the best option of the available choices, Francik said. All new residential construction would be taxed the same, and it would be transparent because it would be a set fee instead of a fee negotiated separately on every project, she said.

Dahlgren said she would like to see state law changed so another option is available. Pasco's had the "perfect storm" with a lot of residential growth but low commercial growth.

While the district has made changes to deal with the cost issues, Pasco Councilman Bob Hoffmann said he doesn't see how adding a new tax is going to fix the issue long term. The current school system is unsustainable, he said.

Hoffmann said he is reluctant to impose a whole new funding source without letting the public vote on it.

But Francik said she believes the school district is trying to spend taxpayer dollars as efficiently as possible. The changes the district has made shows that they aren't just doing things the way they always have been done, she said.

Having a strong school system is essential when trying to attract businesses and jobs to the community, Francik said.

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