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Education impact fees debated

By James Fisher
Daily Times Staff Writer

SALISBURY -- Education impact fees could provide Wicomico County with \$1.7 million to \$3.7 million per year, county officials estimate, although little of those revenues could be spent on replacing James M. Bennett High School, the county's most immediate school spending effort.

The revenue estimate produced by county planning staff arose during a half-hour discussion of draft impact fee legislation which the council might pass into law this year. Council members are considering ways to raise money for school construction as bills for new schools, like a replacement building for Bennett, loom in the near future.

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The law, as drafted, would charge homebuilders \$5,231 per home and \$1,524 per unit in apartments, condos and town houses. The fees would go to public spending that was made necessary by new development, and would likely be factored into the costs of new homes in the county, including homes in its towns and cities.

County attorney Ed Baker, who drafted the legislation, noted that educational impact fees can only pay for projects that accommodate new residents and the school children in their households. The current plans to build the new Bennett High with an official student count of 1,450 students, about as many as now crowd into the existing building with a 1,050-student rating, mean that the impact fee revenues could cover very little of the \$36 million local cost of the new school, Baker said.

"This is not a public school impact fee for Bennett," Baker said. "You're not increasing capacity." He noted that the fees could, however, be legally spent to add portable classrooms to the high school after it is built to boost student capacity.

Planning officials said the amount of the fees, based on a consultant's study from two years ago, may not reflect the current costs of construction and materials.

"Construction costs vary. If anything, the numbers are higher now," planning official Jack Lenox said. "I think the numbers are conservative."

The council did not vote on any aspect of the legislation because the discussion took place outside of a legislative council session. President Tony Sarbanes ended the debate about the fees after about 30 minutes of give and take .

Sarbanes scheduled further discussion for the next council meeting Jan. 17.

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