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## Richland looking for school money sources

Published: November 3, 2012

By Ty Beaver, Tri-City Herald

RICHLAND -- Of the hundreds of new homes built in Richland in recent years, the bulk have been built south and west of the city's core.

Schools are so overcrowded in those areas that some students are bused into central Richland so they have a classroom. It's also part of the reason the district is asking voters to approved a \$98 million bond in February -- to build a new elementary school and middle school to serve the area.

But some district residents are wondering why people moving into the city's growing suburbs aren't being asked to contribute more for the schools they need.

"We need to urge the city to charge builders and new homebuyers for new schools," Kylee Genetti told Richland School Board members during an Oct. 23 meeting.

School impact fees aren't a new concept and were implemented in Pasco this past spring. Richland School District and city officials said they've discussed enacting such a fee on home construction off and on for years, but neither is keen on the idea.

"There wasn't much interest in it by either party," said Richland Mayor John Fox.

A school impact fee is a separate fee builders may be required to pay when they file building applications with a city or county planning office. The fees typically are charged only on residential construction.

In Pasco, the fee is \$4,700 per application and the city has forwarded more than \$666,000 to the district since it was implemented in April.

The Pasco School District, which also is asking its voters to OK a more than \$46 million bond in February, plans to use an estimated \$3.6 million generated by impact fees to help pay for construction projects. The district's schools already are overcrowded and the bond, if approved, would pay for two new elementary schools and an early learning center.

Richland's growth hasn't been as high as Pasco's, but space is getting tight. Elementary schools in central Richland have an average enrollment of 458 students, but the four schools outside the core have an average enrollment of 645 students, with White Bluffs Elementary School at more than 800 students.

Impact fees aren't unheard of when building in many cities, including Richland. The city has a park impact fee on new residential construction and charges a traffic impact fee on new construction in south Richland, based on the number of car trips a project generates, to help cover necessary road improvements, said Public Works Director Pete Rogalsky.

Richland's Public Works Department has proposed a citywide traffic impact fee to pay for capital projects, such as a proposed Duportail bridge and improving the intersection at George Washington Way and Columbia Point Drive.

Fox, Superintendent Jim Busey and Richland School Board Chairman Rick Jansons said the city and district have discussed impact fees during joint sessions of the school board and city council.

But those discussions only revealed a mutual dislike for the idea of school impact fees. Fox said the economic climate wouldn't support such a fee; Busey and Jansons said revenue is minimal and is far from enough to build a school.

"It would generate enough for a couple portables," Jansons said.

There also are hurdles to implementing an impact fee and using the money it generates. Jansons said the revenue from an impact fee has to be spent within five years.

Richland School District covers four jurisdictions -- Richland, West Richland, unincorporated Benton County and small pieces of Kennewick. Busey said it would be difficult to get all four entities to charge the fee. The same is true for Pasco schools, as the Franklin County commissioners discussed implementing an impact fee but haven't acted on it.

Jansons and Rick Simon, Richland's development services manager, also raised concerns about the effect of an impact fee on economic development.

"The higher the fee, the more a disincentive that may be for homebuilders," Simon said.

In Pasco, builders flooded the city's planning office after the City Council approved the impact fee but before it went into effect. Rick White, Pasco's community and economic development director, said his office saw 250 applications for single- and multi-family housing projects in a month, about what the city sees in a six-month period.

White said the number of single-family home permits is down this year compared to last, but multi-family projects are up, and he can't attribute the change to any factor, including the impact fee.

"There were some builders who were upset, but it died down," he said.

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