

School impact fees may triple

District says the funds are needed, builders oppose them

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The St. Johns County School District wants to more than triple impact fees for new residential construction, a move that could further increase the cost of new homes.

The hike is needed to fund 4,817 students who are projected to enter the district from new developments in the next five years, district staff said.

"Our district is growing faster than our means can support," Superintendent of Schools Joseph Joyner said.

The St. Johns County Builders Association opposes all impact fees and believe these costs should be state levied.

Wrapped into the county impact fee that begins at \$2,089, school fees today for single family homes and mobile homes are \$729. Multi-family units pay \$422.

The county is evaluating the amount of current impact fees and whether they should be based on overall square-footage or number of bedrooms.

County Commissioners are working from a study by James C. Nicholas, professor of law and urban studies at the University of Florida, that says impact fees for the county need to increase 40 to 50 percent.

The school district wants the county to change the way impact fees are calculated from the type of home to how much square-footage the structure has.

That change could hike rates from \$852 for an 800-square-foot home to \$5,420 for a home that's more than 4,000 square feet.

These figures further boost the county's proposed portion of the impact fee that caps at \$6,734.

Robert Marshall, chairman of the St. Johns County Builders Association, said transfer fees are a better way for districts to collect money.

Each time a home is sold, extra money goes toward infrastructure costs, he said.

Most new students come from older structures, Marshall said, because most families can't afford new homes.

"And existing homes have no impact fee levied on you," he said. "Eighty percent of new kids come from existing homes."

We can't stop impact fees, Marshall said, but we can recommend the way they are collected.

The Builders Association wants fees included in property taxes, so contractors don't have to absorb the costs, which are then passed on to the buyer.

"The price of steel has tripled, concrete has gone up 30 to 40 percent, gas prices have surged and we've had to compete in three hurricanes for plywood," Marshall said. "And you want us to add \$5,000 to \$8,000 and build a home that people can't buy?"

Marshall said these impact fees may scare off prospective builders.

"Things are good now," he said. "You can't break the back of this boom ... it will go elsewhere."

Impact fees by the numbers

STATS (From the building department)

*2004: 13,616,905 square feet of single-family home construction

INSPECTORS

*1995: 29,309 inspections; 6 inspectors

*2000: 63,099 inspections; 12 inspectors

*2005 projection: 166,596 inspections; 19 inspectors.

*The building department is hoping to hire four more inspectors next year with the fees they generate.

COUNTY STATS

*St. Johns County is the sixth fastest-growing county in Florida, according to the Bureau of Economic and Business Research. The U.S. Census Bureau shows the county is 38th in the nation.

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