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## School district, county work on growth plan

State mandate requires public facilities, like schools, be in place before the area sees residential impact

By Katherine Lewis

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The Collier County School District always has been concerned about student growth.

Developments are built, students move in, schools in the area are filled to capacity and the district starts working on a new school.

But a new state law passed last year is about to change the way the Collier County School District, the county and its municipal governments see the future of schools in the area.

The change is called school concurrency. It is a state initiative requiring school facilities to be in place to serve proposed residential development at an adopted level of service prior to or concurrent with the impacts of the development.

“This will ensure school capacity is available when homes are built,” said Mike McDaniel, a growth management administrator with the state Department of Community Affairs. “Concurrency is intended to forge the link between development and school capacity. It is a pay-as-you-grow plan.”

The School Board and the Collier County commissioners got a taste of this new policy in a workshop with state officials Wednesday.

McDaniel said the provision was passed to help school districts keep up with Florida’s growth. In the next 14 years, the population in Florida is expected to grow 30 percent, he said.

Under the plan, the county government and all local municipalities — Marco Island, Naples and Everglades City — must also enter into an interlocal agreement with the school district to create a cooperative planning effort initiating the school concurrency process.

The specific details in the interlocal agreement must become part of each local government’s comprehensive plan. The county, for example, would have to add a public school facilities element to its comprehensive plan.

In addition, the School Board must create a five-year capital construction plan for new schools and improvements to existing schools. The plans must show where and when the facilities will be built or improved and show where the money to build them will come from.

Local governments determine mitigation requirements, which could include dedication of land, payment of a fee or making improvements to an existing school.

The mitigation must be made to a capacity improvement identified in the district’s five-year plan. The

improvement also must satisfy the demands the development creates. In other words, a developer creating homes in Ave Maria could not provide mitigation money for improvements to a school in East Naples.

The cost of mitigation would be a credit to the developer against any impact fee obligation.

School concurrency provides that a housing development could not be built unless schools in the area had enough room to allow for more students, or the district planned to start construction on a new school within three years of the construction of the development.

This idea worried some of the commissioners, who feared they would not be able to give developers the go-ahead to build new housing.

School Board member Linda Abbott wondered how this would be possible and said a state requirement ensures schools are not built without students to fill the seats.

Alex Carswell, the administration of educational facilities and planning with the state Department of Education, said that would not totally be the case.

“The district has to plan at least five years out,” he said. “You don’t have to have people sitting in the seats to build, but you have to have a projection.”

The group also heard from Angela Usher, the intergovernmental relations manager with the Palm Beach County School District. Palm Beach County is the only county in the state currently using the school concurrency plan. Six additional plans are under development in six other counties.

Usher told the group that, since its inception in June 2002, the concurrency plan has worked well. She said the school district reviews all residential applications and has strong accountability for its work. She said that, prior to the acceptance of the plan, more than half the schools in the county were overcrowded based on the Florida Inventory of School Houses.

But not everything was working as planned. Usher told the group that there is a lack of property for construction and the district sometimes competes with developers for school land. She pointed out that the rising costs of construction materials and class-size reduction decreasing the capacity in schools have made it challenging to implement.

Amy Taylor, a long-range planner with the school district, said the group had several recommendations, including establishing a working group of municipal and school district officials to begin work on the concurrency plan. She said officials would also be approached about the use of consultants, including demographers, school planners and land-use experts, once the plan got into further development.

Collier County must have its plan for implementing concurrency to the state by March 1, 2008.

If the local governments and the district do not adopt the plan, the local governments will be precluded from adopting plan amendments that would increase residential density. The School Board would be subject to sanctions and could have construction money withheld.

The district and the county have worked out a plan to start working on concurrency this summer with the idea it would hold public information meetings in late fall or winter, according to Mike Bosi, a planner with the Collier County planning department.

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