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State backs funds for schools, roads

12 May 2005

By Ed Scott News-Gazette Staff Writer

Paying for new schools and the roads that connect them may get a little easier in Osceola County.

The Osceola County School District could be a direct beneficiary of a landmark \$1.5 billion growth management bill passed by the Florida Legislature last week in the waning moments of its 2005 session.

The bill, which needs Gov. Job Bush's signature to become law, would result in the allocation of about \$14 million in recurring capital funds to the school district for new school construction. It also calls for about \$300 million to build and improve roads in Central Florida, in counties that choose to match funds.

Public-school construction was the top priority of the Osceola Legislative Effort, a group of government and community leaders that lobbies the Legislature, during this year's session.

"This was the best year in recent memory for Osceola County schools, out of Tallahassee," said Mike Horner, president of the Kissimmee/ Osceola County Chamber of Commerce and executive director of OLE. "Our legislators just did an amazing job to create a special category for fast-growing counties that have worked to help themselves."

Horner said revenue generated by the bill will be about equal to what would be generated annually by the increase in the school impact fees, which the Osceola County Commission approved in 2003, or a half-cent sales tax, which voters rejected last year.

It pays for "a school a year," Horner said.

The bill affirms efforts by the Osceola County School Board in recent months to promote development that pays for schools. The issue has occasionally led to disagreements between board members and county commissioners.

"It's like family," Horner said. "You squabble amongst yourselves sometimes, but when it comes to Tallahassee, we join ranks. When it comes to school funding, all four governments have spoken loud and clear to our delegation. It's their top priority."

Schools are one highly publicized portion of the overall bill, which makes growth management a priority in the Legislature's \$65 billion budget.

The bill was authored by state Rep. Randy Johnson, R-Celebration, chairman of the House Growth Management Committee.

"The growth management bill is the most important bill I've passed in my legislative career," said Johnson, who was initially elected in 1998. "This bill not only has a lot of money in it. It changes how we do business in Florida with regard to development."

The fate of the bill was not always certain. Local elected officials, school district employees and community leaders participated in the effort, lobbying legislators and testifying before them. But School Board member Tom Greer gave credit to the seven-member Osceola County legislative delegation.



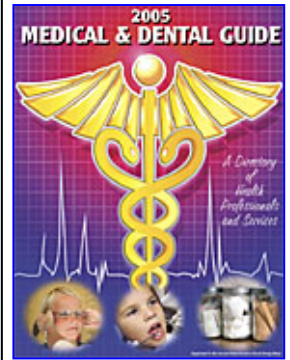
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News-Gazette Photo/ Martin Maddock
Members of the Kissimmee Police Department's SWAT team demonstrated how they respond to a hostage situation during

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"Every one of them leaned in somewhere," he said.

While Osceola County is one of the fastest growing school districts in the state in terms of student enrollment, it is also among the lowest funded as far as per-pupil spending in the operating budget.

Meanwhile, the tax base in Osceola County generates insufficient revenue to cover construction costs related to the anticipated growth of enrollment. This shortfall makes the school impact fees and the revenue from the growth management bill vital to building new schools.

"It closes the gap between what we should be getting for a new student station and what we actually get," Greer said of the bill. "Had this been in place 10 years ago, Osceola County would not be in the (financial) situation it is in now."

Greer added that the new revenue "will reduce the impact fee because it is a new revenue stream."

The school portion of the bill was written by Greer, Osceola County School Superintendent Blaine Muse, and Rick Collins, assistant superintendent for business and fiscal services.

While Osceola County would receive almost half of the \$30 million next year, other counties expected to benefit include Clay, St. Johns, Lake and Hernando. Over time other counties would share in the pot, and Osceola's share may decrease. But Horner said it's nice to be playing defense – defending money already earmarked for the county – rather than playing offense and hoping to receive it.

"This is a fight for money, plain and simple," Johnson said. The reason we prevailed is I found a way to provide new money."

The new funds would come from document stamps, which are levied on the sale of property.

The bill passed at 11:50 p.m. Friday, the final day of the session. About half of the \$1.5 billion in the bill is recurring. In addition to document stamps, the entire bill will be funded by revenue already in the general fund, as the legislature shifts priorities.

It includes no new taxes, a stance Johnson insisted on as he pushed the bill through the House and a conference committee.

"We have plenty of the people's money," he said.

Johnson said he has offered the "high-growth, small-county, school fund" each of the past four sessions, "so I'm very excited about it. This is all about legislators who live in those communities getting to a position of power. It's a food fight. I was able to make the case to my peers in the late hours that this was important, and was able to successfully negotiate with the Senate."

The increased funding would help districts build new schools. A new high school costs about \$50 million, while new middle schools cost about \$22 million and elementary schools about \$17 million. The cost goes up every year.

"It allows us to build schools prior to kids showing up, not after kids show up," Johnson said.

"We have schools that are brand new that have portables on the first day of class, and that does not make sense."

The bill spends about \$1.1 billion on roads. The Central Florida region would receive \$300 million in matching transportation funds.

"We need to catch up on the backlog of needed road construction for development that has already happened," Johnson said.

"If the city or county comes to us with an application to improve (U.S. Highway) 192, we would pay for half of it," Johnson said.

Community Appreciation Day April 30. The city police and fire departments hosted the event to demonstrate their appreciation to the local citizens for all their support throughout the year.

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The bill also calls for "concurrency." Henceforth builders will "pay as they go" for infrastructure needs that their future developments create, Johnson said, adding that it would improve the quality of life of Floridians "by stopping bad development."

"People have noticed that their quality of life has slipped away. (This bill) only allows great development projects to happen and guarantee that that development will pay its fair share."

Now the bill goes to the governor, and a spokesman said he intends to sign it. Bush had told legislators he would support the extra money for school districts if it were submitted as a recurring fund, and they obliged.

"We've worked very closely with the governor on this bill," Johnson said. "He did not get everything he wanted, but we did follow his lead."

"He took a stand on concurrency and I'm proud of him for taking that stand. We felt like we came up with a policy that we can live with that reflected his mission."

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