

Volusia School Board members ready to end impact fees for 2 years

By LINDA TRIMBLE, Staff Writer

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DELAND -- A deal to suspend collection of school impact fees in Volusia County for two years and end a longstanding legal challenge to them will go before the School Board today.

A majority of School Board members said Monday they plan to support the deal to end the litigation and hope it will help create construction jobs and get the local economy back on track. That's what the Volusia Building Industry Association -- which filed the legal challenge -- wants, too, according to one of its leaders.

The proposal calls for:

- Suspension of school impact fee collections for two years retroactive to Jan. 1.
- Withdrawal of a lawsuit the Volusia Building Industry Association filed in 2008.
- Meetings between school district and association representatives to come up with an impact fee formula agreeable to both sides.
- Restoration of the impact fee to its current \$6,066 level for each new housing unit in 2014 if they fail to agree.

The association sued the county in 2008 claiming the impact fee formula was misapplied in 2005 when the county ordinance establishing the fee was revised at the request of the School Board. The board later joined the suit to defend the fee.

Impact fees are charged to developers -- and passed along to their customers -- to pay for roads, parks, schools and other amenities needed to serve residents of new housing.

The school impact fee brought in \$3.2 million in the budget year ending last June 30 compared to \$14.7 million at the building boom peak in 2006-07. Enrollment in Volusia schools dropped by 4,100 students to today's 61,636 in that same time frame.

The County Council and several Volusia cities have suspended or reduced some impact fees in recent months to help the economy.

It's time for the School Board to do the same, said board member Candace Lankford. " I think it's timely, I think it's appropriate and, at this point in time, our community all has to pull in the same direction."

"The more impact fees are suspended, the more people are going to come here to buy a house," said Mark Bines, immediate past president of the Volusia Building Industry Association. He predicted that, in turn, will help create jobs.

"We all agree that having quality education facilities and job creation are important to economic development," he said.

"I hope it will be a good thing for builders, and it kind of puts us in line with most other governments," said School Board member Stan Schmidt. "As building has decreased, we're not giving up a lot of money. If we can help people get back to work, it will help the community."

School Board Chairman Al Williams called the proposed settlement a "good idea."

Board member Diane Smith couldn't be reached for comment, but colleague Judy Conte said she hasn't decided yet how to vote on the issue. Conte fears suspending the fee now will undercut the reasons the board approved it in the first place and make it harder to restore the fee when the economy improves.

The School Board will consider the settlement when it meets at 4 p.m. today in the School Administrative Complex, 200 N. Clara Ave.