

As deadline looms, School Board looks to buy land with millions from impact fee

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The School Board on Thursday gave district administrators the OK to begin negotiating the purchase of 92 acres in Marion Oaks just south of SummerGlen Country Club — acreage that one day would be the site of Marion County's next high school.

Officials believe the Marion Oaks area is where the district will continue experiencing growing pains. There are 70,000 lots in Marion Oaks, a sprawling community located primarily south of County Road 484 in southern Marion.

“I don't think we'll see it (a new high school) in my lifetime,” School Board Chairman Ron Crawford said, noting West Port High has room to grow.

Before allowing Marion County to build a new high school, the state would require rezoning of all high schools until all seats were full. But that could cause problems. For example, pulling too many students out of Dunnellon High, which already has a small population, could affect what programs it offers.

David Herlihy, the district's planning and governmental relations manager, said projections show a new high school will be needed in 14 years.

Herlihy said the landowner, Summer LLC, is willing to discuss selling the property, appraised at \$583,000.

The property is north of Marion/Sumter county line, west of Interstate 75 and south of Southwest Marion Oaks Manor. The western border runs a few blocks east of Southwest 18th Avenue Road.

The property is not quite big enough for a joint middle and a high school campus. However, it could house separate elementary and high school campuses.

The district has money it generated from a school impact fee to pay for growth. The district suspended the impact fee for 2012-13, the second straight fiscal year.

After the recession hit in 2008, the school system has recorded little attendance growth; thus, the district felt uncomfortable collecting the fee.

But the district has about \$6 million in its impact fee fund. By law, that money can only be spent on new construction, including new school wings, or to purchase land.

Of that reserve, \$2.2 million must be spent by the end of 2013-14; \$2.5 million by the end of 2014-15; \$1.2 million by the end of 2015-16; and the balance, roughly \$900,000, by the end of 2016-17.

That's why the School Board continues to actively seek land for future growth.

Meanwhile, it appears negotiation on another piece of land, a 30-acre parcel in Silver Springs Shores known as Bocephus, has ended with no deal. That would have been the future location of a new middle school.

Owners wanted more than the average appraisal for the land, thus the district would have had to pass the sale by a supermajority vote.

That property is north of Oak Road at the southern end of the Country Club at Silver Springs Shores, west of Hickory Road, and east of Silver Road.

The total price of the property on the option-to-buy contract is \$570,000, or \$19,000 per acre, which would have been far more than the appraised value.

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