

DAILY COMMERCIAL

County Commission may waive \$9,000 impact fees in older neighborhoods

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TAVARES - Lake County commissioners said Tuesday that they will move forward with Commissioner Leslie Campione's proposal to mitigate the pain of high impact fees on those seeking to build homes in older neighborhoods.

Campione's proposal would keep the school impact fees at their highest levels - \$9,324 for a new single family home - but would give impact fee waivers to those who want to build on infill lots and on small parcels within three miles of a city hall and within two miles of a school in older neighborhoods. Infill is development of vacant or underutilized parcels.

The impact fee waivers would be capped at 120 homes. The School Board would be required to set aside 10 percent of impact fees accrued for waivers.

The County Commission and School Board must approve the plan in order for it to move forward.

According to county officials, the plan is a way to avoid lowering the school impact fee.

Even so, county commissioners acknowledged if the plan is not successful they may have to resort to lowering the school impact fee. New commissioner Josh Blake wants to reduce the impact fee, stating it puts an unfair burden on homebuyers.

School Board members expressed grave concerns about Campione's plan, saying it would delay construction of new schools and renovations of others.

School Board Chairman Marc Dodd took exception to Campione's plan.

"We are between a rock and a hard place," School Board Chairman Marc Dodd said. "On one hand you have some commissioners that say if you agree to set aside some of your impact fee dollars we will leave you alone. But then you have those that say even if you agree to that we will cut" your budget.

Dodd said Campione's proposal could result in a loss of \$1.5 million to the district yearly.

"If you cut \$1.5 million a year, at the end of five years that's \$7.5 million," he said. "That is a delay in a project. We are 62nd in per pupil funding. We can't afford to lose more. We simply can't. Everybody in this county wants to have a top-performing district. Well, invest in one."

But Campione said there would be a more significant reduction in revenue if the County Commission reduces the impact fees across the board to bring them in line with other communities in Florida. Lake County has one of the highest impact fees in the state. Impact fees are a charge on new or proposed developments.

"By using a waiver system, we are able to leave the current fees in place for new subdivisions which create the largest impact on the overall system because of the number of students they bring into the system in a relatively short period of time, and the fact that they typically require new infrastructure and create the need for new classroom and schools," Campione said.

Campione added: "Furthermore, the School Board would only need to set aside funds for the number of waivers actually granted, and it is possible that very few building permits will be issued under this program but at least it will give Lake County the option of building an older, vacant lot in order to get a waiver."

But Dodd disagreed.

"You can't just look at the price of impact fees against other counties," he said. "It is not an arbitrary number. Our number is based on Lake County's needs and Lake County's funding. If the county understands the value of improving vacant lots I would think they would be as committed to pay for the program but they are asking the School Board to fund the program 100 percent."

Campione said her plan has an added benefit "of revitalizing existing neighborhoods and making housing more affordable because it is unlikely these older lots will ever be built on as long as there is a \$10,000 school impact fee in place."

Commissioner Wendy Breeden hopes Campione's plan would be successful.

However, she acknowledged if it is not effective, the commission would have to look at reassessing the school impact fee.

"I think perhaps a comparable reduction could be in order," she said.

Campione said at the retreat Tuesday that she was also not opposed to lowering the impact fee if that is what the commission had to do.

Blake said the impact fee is simply too much for working families.

"We have close to \$10,000 that gets rolled into a mortgage for your working families that are saving for a down payment to build a home in Lake County," he said. "It is a lot more than \$10,000 over a 30-year mortgage. I think that is excessive. I don't deny the School Board needs funding. I want to reiterate that the people who are paying that are the working people in Lake County, whether they have kids in the system or not."

Parks said, however, he was not in favor of lowering the school impact fee. While interested in Campione's proposal, Parks said he was worried about it impacting schools.

School Board member Bill Mathias said he supported Campione's proposal.

"The idea of giving a waiver for infill in our municipalities and protecting the small builders is absolutely something I support," he said.

But at the same time, Mathias said he was concerned the County Commission may lower impact fees.

"We have got to provide student stations," he said.

If the school impact fee was reduced, the School Board would have to use sales tax funding pledged for other projects to make up for the shortfall or the district would have to resort to double sessions, Mathias said.

Dodd said anyone who is talking about reducing the school budget is not fully aware of the district's needs and how behind they are in accomplishing them.

"A cut to that budget could delay the construction of new schools that are needed now to fix overcrowding and for the renovation of some campuses that are more than 60 years old," he said. "With the amount of debt we currently have it would be irresponsible to add to that debt particularly because we may not be able to pay it back if impact fees are reduced."

Funding for the district's capital needs come from three sources: property taxes, impact fees and the penny sales tax.

Dodd added if the impact fee is reduced, two new schools in the Four Corners would not get built and renovations to Clermont Elementary would be placed on hold.

"It is a shame that education has become such a target," he said. "When you think about our legislature this year, we have been warned our budget will be flat. We are seeing potential cuts on the operation side. We are seeing potential cuts on the capital side. I don't know why society won't invest more in education."