

School Board to consider fee increase

The building projects require \$144M loan, grant application

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LAND O'LAKES - Building schools is getting downright expensive.

And the inches-thick Pasco School Board agenda for Tuesday offers stark testament to just how much it costs to keep a growing school district flush with classrooms.

In one evening, the board will consider:

- Requesting a 13 percent increase in its impact fee.
- Borrowing \$144-million for construction projects.
- Applying for a \$1.6-million grant to support improvements at Pasco High.
- Approving guaranteed maximum prices for two elementary schools in Wesley Chapel, one for \$12.6-million and the other for \$16.5-million.

"Are there continuing needs because we continue to grow? There's no question of that," said board member Allen Altman, who helped lead the county's 2004 effort to win a sales tax increase for school projects. "These are standard things, just a part of ongoing business of this school district in building schools and providing education for kids."

Take the impact fee as an example.

As low as \$1,651 six years ago, the County Commission increased the fee for a new single-family home to \$4,313 in 2005 and agreed to adjust the amount annually based on the demonstrated changes in the cost of construction. The re-evaluation is just following county ordinance.

District officials say a 13 percent hike, to \$4,874, is justified based on the Cost of Construction Index for the southeast United States, using Atlanta as a reference point.

"Why would it be 1 to 2 percent, when you've been listening to the construction industry saying that costs are rising more than 20 percent?" assistant superintendent Ray Gadd said.

The square-foot cost of a school in Pasco is inching closer to \$200. An elementary that once cost \$8-million to \$10-million now runs closer to \$16-million. Just witness those prices under consideration for the two new schools in Wesley Chapel.

The district's current fee brought in \$17-million in fiscal 2005 and, through April, has netted about \$11.5-million this year. It's in the middle of other school district impact fees, which range from Polk at \$8, 596 to Seminole at \$1, 384.

The county government also has acknowledged the rising price tag of construction, increasing its transportation impact fee recently and considering others.

This school-fee adjustment, if approved, could be just the first. The school district also is looking to hire a consultant to determine whether it should revise its fee schedule even further, based on more than one inflation index.

The move to borrow \$144-million comes closely on the heels of the board's decision to bond \$88.5-million of its anticipated sales tax revenue. The bond is slated to pay for yet unnamed Elementary L, Elementary J, Middle School FF and a portion of High School FFF.

The borrowed money will be put toward construction of Gulf Trace Elementary, New River Elementary, Elementary P, Rushe Middle, Sunlake High and a classroom wing at Ridgewood High.

Chief financial officer Olga Swinson has noted several times that the Penny for Pasco simply cannot carry the myriad projects that the district has undertaken.

"It was never, ever, ever adequate for that, and we knew it," Altman said. "That was presented to the public as exactly what it was - to assist on older schools that we were not collecting impact fees on, and to build new schools."

The combination of bonding, borrowing, taxing and seeking grants is the proper mix to support construction, he added.

The School Board will consider all these items Tuesday. Also on the agenda, the board will have a final vote on whether to restrict visible tattoos and piercings for teachers, and will review whether to renew the charter for Countryside Montessori.

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