

Who should pay for roads?

The school district, with its new impact fees, or the county?

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TAMPA - Few people were paying attention when the cost to build a new home in Hillsborough County went up last week, with school impact fees doubling to \$4,000 on average.

But the debate over the fee is far from over.

County officials are eyeing the money as a fight simmers over who should pay to improve roads around new schools. The county and school district are headed to court to settle their disagreement.

"I hope it doesn't turn nasty," said School Board attorney Tom Gonzalez, who said school officials intend to remain civil.

School impact fees are an assessment on new homes that help pay for new schools. Last summer, a divided County Commission voted to increase the fee by 2,000 percent, raising it from \$196 to an average of \$4,000.

The increase was phased in over two years. Assessments on the first half began in November, with the full fee kicking in this month.

Since November, the county has collected \$2.8-million in school impact fees. That was less than expected, in part due to the decline in construction activity.

"The impact fees are like a perfect tax - when there's no growth, there's no fee," said Cathy Valdes, the chief facilities officer for Hillsborough schools. "When we're bringing in the fee, the need is going to be there."

But the state has ordered local governments to lower property tax bills, forcing Hillsborough into a budget-cutting mode. So attention is turning to the millions of dollars needed to install traffic signals, turn lanes, sidewalks and other improvements around new schools.

County officials think the school district should bear more of the burden.

State law on the issue is vague enough that school officials and the county are headed to court to get answers. A lawsuit could be filed late next week.

The county also is talking about retooling the school impact fee so it can be tapped for transportation improvements.

"What it would lead the School Board to do is to look at the full economic impact of sites," said Eric Johnson, the

county's budget director. "That's exactly what a developer does."

School officials are unlikely to embrace the idea.

"It violates the whole concept of getting development to pay for the cost of schools," said Gonzalez, the School Board attorney.

For years, development failed to pay for new schools, he said. The impact fee was supposed to address the problem, he said, not raise money for infrastructure.

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Fast Facts:

Paying for schools

Impact fees on new construction in Hillsborough, by house size.

1,000-1,249 sq. ft.: \$2,793

1,250-1,499 sq. ft.: \$3,146

1,500-1,999 sq. ft.: \$3,565

2,000-2,499 sq. ft.: \$4,000

2,500-2,999 sq. ft.: \$4,345

3,000-3,999 sq. ft.: \$4,764

4,000-plus sq. ft.: \$5,200

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