

## Monforton School looks at impact fees

By [WALT WILLIAMS](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

FOUR CORNERS - No public school in the state has been allowed to collect impact fees from new homes to pay for the facilities needed to serve the students those homes will bring - but Monforton School officials are crossing their fingers they'll be the first.

School officials might soon ask the Gallatin County Commission to allow them to charge up to \$8,380 per home to offset the cost of expanding their campus to accommodate what is expected to be a flood of new students.

The alternative, they argue, is taxing existing residents to pay for those improvements.

"This will lower your (future) taxes if we get this through," Gary Griffith, chairman of the Monforton Board of Trustees, told a small crowd gathered in the school library Tuesday.

Impact fees are imposed on new homes and businesses to help cover the cost of community infrastructure necessary to support those new buildings.

Public schools once were prohibited from collecting impact fees. Then, four years ago, the Montana Legislature changed the law to let schools collect them if they first conduct a study and if they convince either a super majority of city commissioners or all three county commissioners that the fees are needed.

Monforton hired HKM Engineering of Bozeman to do an impact fee study, which was released Tuesday.

The company concluded that the district would be legally justified in asking for up to \$8,380 per home in fees, given the impacts those new homes would have on the school. School officials could charge less if they didn't need the money.

The city of Bozeman has charged roughly \$8,000 in impact fees per home in recent years to pay for road, sewer and water improvements. None of that money goes to schools.

Monforton, the elementary district that covers the Four Corners area, is in the bullseye for growth in the county. About 1,300 new lots have been approved in the 12-square-mile district, and school officials estimate the student population could more than triple in the next 20 years.

The school has collected some voluntary impact fees from developers and has a fund of about \$500,000, Superintendent Lynne Scalia said. But that won't be enough to cover the district's facility needs.

Growth is a divisive issue in the Four Corners community, as evidenced by Tuesday's school board meeting. Trustees and people in the audience argued for hours over the proposed Monforton School Road realignment and an accompanying expansion of the school campus, with several area residents accusing the board of not spending their tax dollars wisely.

The only subject no one took issue with during the meeting was impact fees. Board members

asked the audience for help in convincing county commissioners to sign off on the idea.

That, however, won't be easy.

Monforton will need a unanimous vote of the Gallatin County Commission to collect those impact fees. Such a move might set a precedent in the county, and other schools districts could follow the school's lead if it is successful.

Two county commissioners said Wednesday they would need to be convinced the fees were necessary.

"My position all along has been I'm not a supporter of using impact fees to subsidize schools," said Commissioner Steve White, pointing out that schools already receive state revenue in addition to local tax revenue.

Commission Chairman Joe Skinner also pointed out that the schools can draw on multiple sources of revenue. And, he said, commissioners need to keep in mind affordable housing. If they start tacking on impact fees to every little thing, "it is going to be a huge amount."

Still, both commissioners said they will keep an open mind.

Officials from the county's rural school districts are scheduled to appear before the commission at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday at the County Courthouse, Scalia said.