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## Schools weigh big increase

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August 29, 2007

TAVARES

Another batch of impact fees may be coming for county approval, if the Lake County School Board decides tonight that it wants to double school-impact fees.

The hike would increase the fees by almost 108 percent. That would double the fees for single-family homeowners from \$7,055 to \$14,646. Mobile-home owners would have to pay \$5,183 instead of the \$2,497 they've paid since 2004.

Officials say the raise would help the school district catch up with growth in Lake County.

"What the impact-fee study reviews is resources versus need, and it bridges the gap between the two," School Board Chairman Larry Metz said Tuesday.

The new fee would give Lake the highest rate in Central Florida, surpassing Osceola, where residents pay \$9,981. But Lake's new suggestion is a reduction from the \$17,513 fee that Henderson Young & Company recommended earlier this year. That's because the School Board decided to count more portables as permanent classrooms.

The potential raise comes as the school district braces for cuts from the state, which have yet to be quantified.

It also comes on the heels of a hotly contested increase in road-impact fees, which Lake County commissioners unanimously rejected last week.

Opponents who didn't like the prospect of raising road-impact fees by up to 800 percent say they don't like the thought of hiking school-impact fees, either.

"You'd have to be blind not to see that the economy of Lake County is in serious peril," said Don Magruder, vice president of Ro-Mac Lumber & Supply Inc. "Everyone understands that now is not the right time to increase fees."

Home builders say it has been hard enough to get people to buy houses in this slumping market. Adding more impact fees would only make it harder to lure potential buyers.

"It's very difficult to sell a house that's more than \$200,000 right now," said Jim Bible, president of the Home Builders Association of Lake County. "When it [the school-impact fee] was \$500 or \$1,000, it wasn't such a big deal. But now it's \$14,000. That's a big deal."



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But a number of other home builders in the area support the fees, School Board member Scott Strong said.

"I believe the school system and the home builders are partners," Strong said. "We probably are the most important factor in helping them sell homes."

The School Board will have a special meeting tonight to discuss the impact fees. It's scheduled for 6:30 p.m. at the Lake County School District Board Room.

If approved, the School Board will make its recommendation to the Lake County Commission, which must approve the boost.

Commission Chairman Welton Cadwell said because one impact-fee raise was rejected doesn't mean the schools will see the same fate.

"If the School Board, in the current climate, wants to increase impact fees, then we'll have to look at that issue and hold public hearings," Cadwell said Tuesday after a commission meeting. "It's not the same as road-impact fees because it doesn't affect commercial properties."

It may be too early to tell whether the school-impact fees, if presented to county commissioners, will pass. But Magruder is "optimistic" it won't.

"The economy itself is forcing everyone to rethink fees. As the economy deteriorates, people need to be very careful about adding fees," Magruder said. "Now is not the time."

Strong said it's not fair to put school-impact fees in the same boat as road-impact fees.

The school district opened three new elementary schools this year and added two new classroom buildings to overcrowded high-school campuses in the county, he said.

"Do not compare roads and children. The impact will not be the same," Strong said. "We've got tangible results."

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