

NEWS > LOCAL

County commissioners address garbage, school impact fees[Print Page](#)**By STEVE STEINER**
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With a faltering economy on their minds, the Polk County Board of County Commissioners on Wednesday took measures to contain costs on several "hot button issues," chief among them an education impact fee.

However, long before that issue was addressed in the agenda, the commissioners took up the matter of selecting a vendor to furnish both 138,000 95-gallon rollcarts and 6,500 65-gallon rollcarts, to provide residential automated garbage collection primarily for citizens living in unincorporated areas of the county.

Commissioners looked at two 95-gallon rollcarts prototypes as Brooks Stayer, director of the Polk County Waste Resource Management Division, spoke. The taller of the two rollcarts had been provided by Rehrig Pacific (based in Los Angeles), the other by Otto Environmental Systems North America (headquartered in Charlotte, N.C.). Of the four companies that had bid, these were the two lowest, with Rehrig-Pacific's bid \$6,075,985. Stayer said in a later interview that Otto's bid was approximately \$21,000 higher.

The decision was not a cut-and-dried process.

Florida Refuse Service, Inc., the company the county has contracted to haul residential garbage for the next seven years, sent an e-mail in which it stated it preferred the rollout carts manufactured by Otto. Florida Refuse offered to offset the cost by paying \$22,800 out of its coffers, which would purchase roughly 500 rollcarts.

However, county attorney Michael Craig advised against accepting the offer, as it could lead to possible legal action from Rehrig-Pacific.

Commissioners voted to award the contract to Rehrig-Pacific.

Discussed at greater length was a proposed fee increase in garbage rates. The county faced an option over how to meet the annual cost it has with Florida Refuse.

There were two proposals to consider, going with one fixed fee of \$117 per year per customer over the life of the contract, or adopt a sliding scale, called an index rate, which would be based upon the Consumer Price Index (CPI); the current fee is \$125.41.

A graph showed the purchase of the rollcarts would prompt an increase of 10 percent the second year of the contract, in order to cover the cost of the carts. In the fourth year of the contract, if further containers were purchased — in part an effort for the county to begin meeting a state-imposed recycling mandate — that purchase would mean yet another projected 10 percent increase, which would take effect the fourth year of the contract. (The mandate requires a 75 percent recycling goal. Polk County's current rate is 29 percent.)

To offset the cost, commissioners voted to lower the current fee to \$100, which will take effect Jan. 1, but which Stayer said in a later interview would not start to be collected from the majority of Polk County residents until March 2011. Commissioners factored into the lower cost a reduction in service, from pickup twice per week to once per week.

District 2 Commissioner Randy Wilkinson commented that the decrease would be greatly appreciated by those affected.

School Impact Fee

Commissioners took up the issue of the school impact after they reconvened from the morning session. For approximately two hours, they listened as first Randy Young, consultant with Redmond, Wash.-based Henderson, Young and Company, presented his study, then took comments from the public in an open

forum.

In his presentation, Young said his study called for an increase in a school impact fee that more than doubled the fee for new single-family homes, from \$4,171 to \$9,456.

Part of the cause behind the dramatic rise, Young said, rests with the state. In an ideal situation, if the state were to pay, as it did in 2006 and 2007, the impact fee would be reduced. Failure by the state shifts the responsibility to Polk County taxpayers.

Among his arguments, Young was emphatic when he stated impact fees do not chase development away. He immediately followed that statement with a declaration.

"I'm not here as an enemy of the home construction business," he said.

He pointed out that a now-deceased uncle was a home contractor, and then said that unemployment, tight credit and a large inventory of existing homes are reasons new home construction is depressed.

There was a clear divide between those in the home construction industry (or businesses related to home construction) and educators. Those in construction wanted the commissioners to defeat the proposal, while educators wanted it accepted.

"Impact fees are becoming the path of least resistance," said Terry Pittman.

He asked commissioners to table the item until after the November general election.

Pittman is with Business Builders of America, Eagle Lake. In a later interview, he said he was the immediate past facilities director for the Board of Commissioners; also, he is a school board candidate for District 6.

Neil Combee also spoke out against the impact fee, one of his arguments being current conditions.

"I just turned 51 this past Saturday, and this is the worst economy I've ever seen," he said. "It's the people's money and the money's not there."

Combee also said the fee is applied to too narrow a category.

"Fees are taxes paid by a smaller group of people," he said.

In contrast, Kay Fields, chairwoman of the Polk County School Board, urged the impact fee be adopted and approved, with one proviso, that it not be implemented, as the economy is weak.

She was backed up by Fred Murphy, the county's assistant school superintendent. He supported a moratorium. However, he reminded commissioners that class size has been mandated by the state.

"Class size is going to take effect and we have to be in compliance," Murphy said. "There is a monetary penalty if the school system doesn't meet the class size mandate."

Deferring a decision was not an option, said the county attorney. The commissioners needed to adopt a study.

With that, Commissioner Jean Reed, from District 4, made a motion to approve the study. Another motion, made by Smith, was to set the impact fee at 44 percent of the amount suggested in the study. Both motions passed. Another motion, made by Reed, to review the numbers presented in Young's study a year from now, failed.

The fee will be \$4,160 for a new, single-family house.