

Cutting impact fees not right idea

At 1:30 p.m. Tuesday at the government center in New Port Richey the Pasco County Commission will vote on reducing impact fees. This includes impact fees collected by the county, but also those collected for the Pasco County School Board specifically to pay for schools built for growth.

The school board is elected by the voters and given, among many others, the task of paying for the schools built to handle the growth we all watched explode from the mid-1990s until 2006. While the school board must find a way to pay for the bonds, they are also facing the county commission that, with strong pressure from builders and developers, wants to cut the school impact fee in half.

I held my first town hall meeting on April 6 at Seven Springs Middle knowing that last year they had several dozen at the same meeting. We had over 500 parents, teachers, students and taxpayers show up.

This year, everyone is acutely concerned about the massive budget deficit we all face for the coming school year and it showed. They came with ideas and a voice, and I am extremely proud of all who attended.

The taxpayers need to know that the school board passed a unanimous resolution that asked the commission not to further risk our schools and even our bond rating by cutting the school impact fees. It is revenue that helps pay for bond debts on schools built to accommodate new growth. Without that amount the school district might be forced to tap into general operating money to cover the costs. That would mean less for school programs and a further reduction in school jobs.

As a Realtor, it would be easy for me to say that impact fees from new construction are not the best way to fund growth. The county has been working with builders for years to come up with alternative funding to replace some of the current impact fees. Instead of working with the schools in the same way, they have just gone to the county commission and told them to cut them in half.

As a school board we have no ability by state statute to replace the revenue source that will be lost.

The commission stated that the move to cut school impact fees was a gamble, but they felt they had to try something. I do not believe that any gamble that affects the quality of our children's education is worth the possible reward.

We have yet to hear much from the county staff as this move is strictly a political move by the building industry in Pasco County. I do not believe the builders had the best interest of children's education in mind when they made this proposal.

These same people are also cherry-picking our budget with their limited knowledge of educational state statutes and long-range planning that occurs to ensure our children receive a quality education now and in the future.

The bottom line is we are taking a huge gamble and the chance that it will have the desired impact is questionable. The claim that thousands of dollars in school impact fees could easily be the difference to make them competitive is very debatable.

Every day we put foreclosure after foreclosure and short sale after short sale on the market and the prices keep going down because of it. Builders can't compete when resales, which normally run about 92 to 97 percent of the price of new construction, are today running at or near 50 to 60 percent the cost of new.

Builders, before the bust, relied on cost appraisals, and lending guidelines today say that the lower of cost or market-driven pricing is today's appraisal value. This means that builders have an extremely tough lending environment that is designed to minimize lending risks in a down market.

We can't lose sight of the fact that with more than 10,000 vacant housing units in Pasco right now we do not need

more. We must get rid of the foreclosures and end short sales before our home prices and the tax base can begin to heal. Not only would this move by the county not help our recovery efforts it may well prolong the recovery.

The bottom line is that county commissioners have proposed a measure that would cut school impact fees in half, risk teacher jobs and hurt our children. All for the promise of a dramatic increase in homebuilding, which is unlikely, and more housing units, which are not needed.

Economists tell us that education is one key to leading us out of a recession. We can't expect to recover if we continue to take from our education system.

It is important that everyone's voice be heard. On Tuesday, when the commission meets, I encourage every parent, businessperson, retiree and taxpayer to attend.

It is imperative that commissioners know that further cuts to our education system are not acceptable. The builders got the attention of commissioners by showing up in mass numbers. Now is the time to show up in support of our students, our many excellent teachers and support personnel, and the future of our school system.

On Monday, I also will hold a rally for those unable to attend the afternoon commission meeting. From 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. at State Road 54 and Little Road, I am inviting students, parents, teachers and concerned citizens to join me by bringing a sign and waving them to show our support for our schools and our students.

I would also encourage anyone attending the county commission budget workshops to also give them your opinion at that time. I would also ask everyone who believes what I do to write, call, email or visit your county commissioners.

This is our chance to make a difference and I encourage everyone to take part.

Cynthia Armstrong is a Pasco County School Board member representing District 3.