

Study says education impact fee of nearly \$7,000 justified in Hernando

Danny Valentine, Times Staff Writer, Friday, October 11, 2013 5:29pm

BROOKSVILLE — As construction in Hernando County slowed to a virtual standstill during the recession, crippling one of Hernando's largest industries, county officials tried to help.

One major strategy: Discount or suspend impact fees, the one-time levies on new home construction.

But with the economy now improving and construction ticking up, most of the impact fees have been restored or are scheduled to return.

The notable exception: the fee for education.

That could change next year.

A new study commissioned by the Hernando County School Board shows the County Commission could justify a fee of nearly \$7,000 on new home construction to help pay for growth in the schools.

The fee of \$6,988 on a single-family home would be 64 percent higher than the most recent education impact fee of \$4,266. That figure takes into consideration money from a sales tax that currently is in place. If the sales tax is allowed to expire, the county could justify charging \$7,103 to offset school district growth, according to the study.

And growth is coming — eventually — according to school district projections.

Enrollment projections show student population increasing by nearly 3,300 students by the 2023-24 school year, including six consecutive years of greater than 1 percent growth.

The district expects it will need roughly \$30 million for school capacity projects within the next 10 years, including a new K-8 school on the east side of the county, said Roland "Bo" Bavota, the director of facilities.

Bavota said the education impact fee is essential for future construction and the ability of the district to effectively accommodate its students.

"You've got to plan for it so you don't get into a crisis down the road where you don't have any money," he said.

For years, Hernando County schools struggled to keep up with growth as enrollment ballooned. Between 2000 and 2007, the student population jumped from 17,000 to more than 22,700.

Schools became overcrowded. Portable classrooms dotted campuses. New schools went up.

Then the nationwide recession hit.

The district has seen four consecutive years of contraction, and enrollment this year is more than 1,000 students below what it was in 2010.

Generally, that means existing schools have room to grow. But some schools are more full than others.

The district's elementary and K-8 schools have 14 percent of their permanent capacity available, the middle schools 29 percent and the high schools 23 percent, according to the impact fee study.

Bavota says enrollment is expected to decrease slightly for two more years before rebounding and increasing, which he says is in line with county government predictions.

"We're going to see growth, but not right away," he said.

Bavota says impact fee dollars are used for projects both big and small. They can go for anything from new school construction to other projects associated with growth — new buses, technology or classroom furniture, for example.

The School Board is set to discuss the impact fee study, and impact fees in general, at its workshop Tuesday afternoon. Impact fees have been a hot-button issue for the board in recent months, inspiring impassioned arguments on both sides.

Anticipating arguments against impact fees, Bavota has prepared a presentation on "impact fee myths." Illustrated with images of gnomes, unicorns and fairy princesses, he tackles several points, including the notion that the county might not be able to compete for home buyers if impact fees are restored.

While that may be true if the fees are exorbitant, it's not true if the fees are fair and other counties also have them, according to the presentation.

Board Chairman Matt Foreman has been staunchly opposed to the fees, saying he doesn't feel they are applied equitably.

"What you're doing is you're going after a small group of people who are putting money into industry and you're taking it from them," he said during a recent board meeting.

Dianne Bonfield has been one of the fiercest proponents of the fees, saying the district badly needs the revenue.

"Where's the money going to come from for us to build schools?" she said recently. "Well, I guess it's going to come from the taxpayers that have lived in Hernando County year after year who have been here through thick and thin."

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Study says education impact fee of nearly \$7,000 justified in Hernando 10/11/13 *[Last modified: Friday, October 11, 2013 7:02pm]*

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