

## Lake schools are growing — cash isn't

**While growth is steadily returning to the 41,000-student district, the cash to support it — known as school impact fees — has not kept up.**

By Erica Rodriguez, Staff Writer

*September 16, 2013*

School leaders at Sawgrass Bay Elementary in Clermont opened two new kindergarten classes to handle dozens of new students. At Lake Minneola High School — the district's newest school — the campus is already about 100 students over capacity. Since school began last month, 918 new students have streamed into classrooms — a trend the district only expects to continue over the coming years.

But while growth is steadily returning to the 41,000-student district, a revenue source to help support it — school impact fees — hasn't kept up.

Within the next five years, district officials expect they will need another school between Lost Lake Elementary in Clermont and Sawgrass Bay Elementary in Four Corners. They expect the school will cost up to \$35 million, but there is just \$6 million in capital plans to spend on new classrooms.

In the nine years I've been here this is the absolute smallest, thinnest, least-funded of the capital plans we've ever had," Harry Fix, the district's growth-planning chief, told School Board members recently.

The district largely relies on school impact fees to pay for new construction. Since January 2011, however, the fees have been suspended by county commissioners — costing the district \$23.8 million. The county previously charged a \$9,324 fee to home builders to pay for school needs but suspended them to encourage building. A 2011 study recommends a new fee at \$10,292, but county commissioners were uneasy about such a high rate. School Board members agree the \$10,292 is exactly what's needed to pay for growth but don't agree on how to collect that cash.

Board member Bill Mathias believes one way to pay for growth would be to charge new homebuyers the \$10,292 fee, which would be collected over several years. The district and Lake commissioners first would have to hammer out plans to create a special-taxing district encompassing the entire county before that idea could work.

"It is a tax," Mathias said. "At the end of the day you can't run from the fact that growth costs money and puts a real stress on the school district. So it is a tax to those new homeowners to move into Lake County to enjoy the quality of lifestyle that we all just crave."

County Commission Chairwoman Leslie Campione said she is "open-minded" about a special district and impact-fee discussion, but the fees can't be the district's "silver bullet" to fund school needs.

"If you put an impact fee in place to try to take care of all of your issues," Campione said, "I think you run the risk of completely shutting down any kind of new construction in your economy."

School Board members and county commissioners are due to discuss impact fees and the special district concept at a joint meeting at 2 p.m. today at the round courthouse, 315 W. Main St., Tavares.

***ericarodriguez@tribune.com*** or 352-742-5928