

EDITORIAL: FUMBLING IMPACT FEE DIMINISHES SCHOOL BOARD'S CASE

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Hernando School Board members will have a hard time convincing county commissioners, home builders and the general public on the need for a new, higher impact fee for education if they can't even convince themselves.

Last week, a board majority, with Dianne Bonfield absent, flailed around for an hour trying to dump their responsibility onto the county commission. The foot-dragging and buck-passing stemmed from a newly released consultant's study that said the county should charge an impact fee of nearly \$7,000 per newly constructed single-family home to offset growth demands on public schools.

The commission halved the \$4,266-per-single-family-home school impact fee in 2009, and then waived it entirely two years later. Last year, commissioners rejected the school board's request to renew the charge, saying they needed an updated cost analysis.

The new data is now available, but School Board members last week were reluctant to ask for the recommended amount and, instead, sought to abdicate their responsibility. Board member John Sweeney simply wanted to send the report to the commission without comment while Gus Guadagnino suggested asking for an impact fee, but with no dollar amount specified. They should be embarrassed by their absence of leadership.

The impact fee, if adopted at the recommended amount, is projected to raise \$61 million over 10 years to help finance an approximately \$223 million capital plan that includes \$30 million for new classrooms, \$10 million for technology upgrades, \$73 million in maintenance to existing buildings and \$110 million in debt service for past school construction. To pay for it, the school district's business plan also calls for extending the half-cent sales tax that expires next year to raise \$78 million and using property taxes to cover another \$90 million.

Without the impact fee, the school district faces the likelihood of forgoing the maintenance and allowing existing schools to fall into disrepair or else putting a greater financial burden on property owners by raising the ad valorem tax rate. State help is unlikely. The Legislature directed no capital construction dollars to local districts for three consecutive years.

Only School Board member Cynthia Moore grasped the consequences of doing nothing.

"We're just postponing the inevitable," she told the board and suggested using impact fees to help offset debt from past construction is akin to telling new residents, "Hey, we got ready for y'all to come here. Let's help pay for it."

Her logic eventually won out and the board, with Chairman Matt Foreman dissenting, instructed its attorney to prepare a resolution for the county commission asking for the new impact fee of \$6,988 per single-family home. The board must formally adopt the resolution in November and then needs county commission approval because it is the county that charges the fee and passes through the proceeds to the district.

Confronting the building industry's familiar argument that impact fees will kill residential construction requires sound financial data and a supply of political courage. School Board members have their numbers; now they need to develop some conviction.

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