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Fees on home construction best way to handle crisis

Pasco has seen major growth for more than a decade.

And no part of the city has felt the crunch more than the schools.

The schools are jammed with students, and the district has been looking for ways to find new sources of money to help pay for new buildings.

Based on the district's existing schools and portable classrooms, the capacity is 14,800 students and enrollment is 15,600. See the problem?

Trying to find room for 800 extra students would be challenging enough, but the district expects enrollment to grow by 34 percent in the next six years to 21,000 students. See an even bigger problem looming?

New schools clearly are a necessity, not a luxury for Pasco. The district figures it will need five new schools, additional portable buildings and an expansion at Chiawana High, which is just two years old, in order to accommodate an additional 5,400 students.

But with a price tag of \$143 million for all the projects, voter-approved bonds and state matching money won't cover all the costs. So the district has proposed a school impact fee on new homes built within its boundaries.

When the district first floated the idea last year, it had even grander plans for construction and a higher-priced impact fee. But it has scaled back and plans to shift sixth-graders to elementary schools, eliminating the need to build more costly middle schools in the next few years.

Impact fees under the revised proposal would be \$4,683 for a single-family home and \$4,525 per unit for a multi-family project. The assumption is that the builder will pass that cost along to the buyer by increasing the price of the home.

School impact fees aren't used in the Mid-Columbia, but are used widely in other states. And given the circumstances, the fees make sense for Pasco.

Rapid growth brings many good things to an area and is a sign of a healthy economy, but it also has its drawbacks, straining services and school systems for years before the infrastructure can catch up.

In the last decade, Franklin County was the 18th fastest-growing county in the nation, increasing its population by about 60 percent.

The Pasco School District is asking the city and Franklin County to force developers to negotiate a payment with the district during the planning phase of a subdivision. But that requires the district to negotiate with individual developers on every project.

A better solution would be an ordinance that would require impact fees to be automatically attached to new home construction when building permits are issued.

Some folks will say that impact fees on new homes are unfair. True, not everyone who buys a new home has children in the schools. But all property owners must pay for school bonds and levies whether they have kids or not. Schools are a part of the community and affect property values in positive ways.

Others argue that the impact fees are unfair because they apply in one community but not another, or they argue that the additional costs could push the dream of homeownership out of reach for some people.

But the quality of Pasco schools is at stake, and a solid educational system is key to the future economic health of our community. If the district can raise a few million dollars through school impact fees, it seems like a good step toward building more schools and fulfilling the needs of our children.

City and county officials may be reluctant to create what essentially is a tax on new homes, but of all the options for dealing with the district's mounting crisis, this one makes the most sense.