

Foreman needs to lead on Hernando school impact fees, not stand in the way

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Hernando School Board Chairman Matt Foreman was right about one thing.

Builders don't pay impact fees, he said at a workshop last week, "the person who pays for the house (ultimately) pays for that."

Which is just the point.

People who buy new houses often bring new children into the school district. The more students, of course, the more schools we need, which is how we get to the name of these fees. They cover the average *impact* on the district of each new household.

And if you don't account for it this way, the burden is spread around to homeowners who didn't create it, in the form of higher property taxes.

Higher taxes for all to pay for a need created by the few.

Anybody can see that's not fair, right?

Apparently not Foreman.

He said last week that school impact fees are "not equitably applied. The truth is that supporting impact fees in some ways just feels like a cop-out because if you're going to take the money from somebody then you should just vote for a millage increase."

He didn't just miss the point of impact fees, it seemed, he flipped it on its head.

Actually, Foreman's views are a little more nuanced, he explained later.

Just about everybody who builds a new home uses or at least has access to roads, parks and other stuff paid for by impact fees, he said. But many buyers of new homes don't have kids, meaning they pay for impacts they don't create on facilities they can't use.

Okay, but when it comes to impact fees — and all school taxes — we recognize that public education benefits everybody, not just children and their parents. And schools obviously need school buildings. And courts have decided that buyers of new homes can be docked for the average demand they create for new classrooms, which, if it's any consolation to childless folks, doesn't even amount to a full desk in Hernando, just one-third of one.

I repeat, the *courts* have decided this, specifically the Florida Supreme Court. It has approved the concept of educational impact fees, leaving the fees as counties' main tool to accommodate growth.

It's a question that's been asked and answered, as lawyers say. And Foreman, being one of them, knows this better than anyone else on the board. For him to bring this debate into the board chamber is disappointing and dangerous.

Disappointing because Foreman is not just the board chairman, he's its most forceful speaker, its leader.

The board needs him to build consensus and light a fire under the folks compiling the data needed to push for a legally justified impact fee. Instead it has a naysayer, one who, by the way, is not advocating higher property taxes or any other replacement for impact fees.

Tuesday's workshop, without much leadership, ended without an agreement about what to do with impact fees, which haven't been fully collected in four years.

Maybe it hasn't mattered all that much in this era of slow growth and flat enrollment.

But even in these times, schools have missed out on \$2.2 million in impact fee revenue, much of it in the past few months as the number of permits issued for new homes has started to inch upward.

As this trend continues, it will mean more children in a district with no plan to accommodate them — a district with a leader who, on this issue, refuses to lead.