

## Pasco commission reverts to costly ways

Lest anyone had any doubt who controls Pasco County government, it was made clear Tuesday when county commissioners agreed to reduce the impact fee that helps fund construction of new schools.

Commissioners fell for the development industry's tired old song-and-dance that it needed resuscitating, and lowering the education impact fee would help do the trick, allowing it to build more homes.

This, in a county with thousands of vacant and foreclosed homes and where more than 300,000 future residential units have been approved enough housing for the next 60 years, according to the Urban Land Institute. When the 2010 U.S. census was conducted, 17 percent of Pasco homes were vacant.

Commissioners placed their loyalty to builders above the interests of residents and taxpayers by agreeing to cut the \$4,876 school fee by 50 percent; the formal vote is April 19.

It was yet another concession by a board that already has pared back road and other impact fees by an additional \$6,100. The total amount of impact fees on new homes in Pasco, including water and sewer, are about \$21,000 high, yes, but warranted, given the widespread impact of unchecked growth.

The planned cuts are supposed to be temporary; the fees are scheduled to revert to previous levels in early 2013. But the commission's lack of backbone indicates it will be unlikely to keep its commitment, especially when the developers flex their muscles.

For decades, Pasco County officials have foolishly relied on development as the county's chief economic driver. The result has been congested highways and overcrowded schools the main reasons voters agreed to an extra penny in sales tax in 2004.

The public school system has been hurt the most by the county's inept growth policies. It took years for school officials to convince county commissioners to adopt a school impact fee. Then, county officials who blindly disregarded the link between new subdivisions they approved and the need for more schools began treating the school system like a private developer, trying to force it to pay for off-site improvements needed for new schools.

The commission's impact-fee decision is expected to cost the school system about \$4.5 million over the next two years. The price could be steeper if more unneeded subdivisions are built. The district already is anticipating a \$60 million budget shortfall for 2011-12.

In all likelihood, the impact fee move won't prompt more development in a community with an oversupply of houses. But it does destroy any notion that Pasco officials, who are working to recruit industry and business, learned from their sins of the past. Voters should not forget it.