

Polk School Board Wants to Keep School Impact Fees

County commissioners imposed a moratorium on other impact fees.

By Tom Palmer, THE LEDGER

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BARTOW | Polk School Board members are not interested in eliminating school impact fees, they told the County Commission Thursday.

County commissioners imposed a moratorium on all but school impact fees in 2010 and are seriously considering an extension for as much as two years this year.

County Commissioner Todd Dantzler, an impact fee opponent, questioned how much impact fees add to the school budget.

The amount is relatively small — revenue has dropped from about \$32 million a year to about \$1.4 million a year — but it's the only source of funding for new construction at the moment, said Mark Gray, assistant superintendent for business services.

Most of the sales tax revenue is going for debt service and there has been no state construction funds appropriated this year and none expected next year, Gray said.

Impact fee revenue can only be used to take care of the effects of growth, said Fred Murphy, assistant superintendent for support services.

Murphy said that includes replacing portable buildings with permanent buildings as well as expanding and renovating schools to deal with growth pressures.

"We don't want to spend the money replacing old portables with new portables," he said.

Murphy said the impact fee revenue is being used this year to add classrooms at Sikes Elementary near Lakeland, Chain of Lakes Elementary near Winter Haven and Eastside Elementary in Haines City.

County Commissioner Melony Bell asked whether school officials had any other source of money for construction.

Gray said the only way to increase the property tax would be to get voter approval in a referendum, but said that's only good for no more than four years.

County Commissioner Bob English told School Board members the purpose of the impact fee moratorium was to attract new business to Polk County to restart the local economy.

"The question is would it make Polk County more attractive if we got rid of the school impact fee, too?" he asked, citing the small amount involved.

But School Board Chair Hazel Sellers said people are very concerned about the quality of schools.

"People don't like it when a portion of a library or a cafeteria is cordoned off for classrooms," she said. "I understand about using impact fee moratoriums to bring business, but you have to balance it with good schools."

In fact, later in the meeting English broached the idea of approving an additional tax to improve Polk's schools to make the county more competitive for economic development.

"If we want to compete successfully, we need to find the money," English said.

He compared it to the extra tax he pushed his commission colleagues to approve in 2005, though critics said the only reason that tax increase was necessary was because commissioners had refused to levy impact fees or had levied impact fees that were far too low.

School Board member Debra Wright asked what kind of system the county had to evaluate whether the impact fee moratorium commissioners approved really delivered on the economic stimulus as claimed.

County Manager Jim Freeman acknowledged there's little hard data.

"To some extent it's anecdotal," he said. "I'm not sure there's a set of data that would answer that question."

Nevertheless, Dantzler said, the "only way out of the morass is to create growth" though he acknowledged business decisions "involve a lot more than impact fees."

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