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## School board debates impact fees

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Highlands Today

With the one-year suspension of impact fees nearing an end, the School Board of Highlands County grappled with its recommendation to the county on whether or not to continue the suspension of fees.

After the school board unanimously approved the new impact fee study on Tuesday, it discussed the county's proposal to continue the suspension of collecting the fees for another year.

When new construction slowed considerably due to the economic downturn, impact fees were suspended with the belief that it would spur development. But, with the severity of the economic crisis, there has been no surge of new construction.

School Board Member Andy Tuck said if what they thought was going to happen didn't happen what would be the purpose of reimplementing impact fees?

Superintendent Wally Cox said, "They thought by suspending them we would create a lot of growth. It didn't create a lot of growth by suspending them."

The school board members laughed when Tuck replied, "I definitely don't think it's going to create any by going back and collecting them."

At this time, the district does not have any other revenue sources for new buildings, according to Assistant Superintendent of Business Operations Mike Averyt.

"Impact fees are the only way we can generate revenue for construction at this point," he said. When houses are built, people will come causing an impact the district will face down the road.

School Board Member J. Ned Hancock supports the impact fee concept.

The fees are great when the economy is vibrant and there is growth and the people who are creating the impact are helping support the services they will get such as schools, he said.

But, "I can't imagine wanting to do anything in the current economic condition that would put any kind of a bump in the road for anybody who wants to build anything," he said.

The board should encourage the county commissioners not to suspended the fees indefinitely, but suspend them for a year and then see if the economic climate has improved, Hancock said.

School Board Chairman Wally Randall said what if there is stimulation in new construction and it causes an impact, the school district would not have any funds to react to it.

He is concerned about sliding farther down a slope based on the funding cuts the school district has received, he said.

With funding based on student enrollment, Tuck noted that quick growth in the student population would probably be the best thing for the district.

School Board Vice-Chairman Richard Norris said the district existed without impact fees for so many years.

School Board Attorney John McClure noted that the proposal is just for one year and in that space of time the chance for a big change in growth is very slim.

The school board voted 4-1 to support the county's recommendation to extend the suspension of impact fees for one more year. Randall cast the "no" vote.

The current ordinance that suspends the collection of impact fees will expire on June 30.

The Board of County Commissioners will hold public hearings on the impact fee study ordinance and the suspension of impact fees ordinance at its meeting at 9 a.m., June 22, in its meeting room at 600 S. Commerce Ave, Sebring.