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Schools want impact fee doubled

Board members seek increase to house an extra 8,500 students expected to enroll in next 5 years

By [Kara Phelps](#)
News Chief staff

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BARTOW - The Polk County School Board may ask the county commission to more than double school impact fees next year.

School Board members are talking about increasing fees to house an extra 8,500 students expected to enroll in public schools during the next five years. This comes a week after the Florida Supreme Court voted against hearing a Polk County Builders Association case against school impact fees.

In a work session Tuesday, board members looked at impact fee recommendations from consulting firm Henderson, Young and Company. In a report, the firm used estimates of population growth and other factors to argue that school impact fees should increase to \$10,830 for each new single-family home built in Polk County. The current fee is \$4,171 for a single-family home.

Fred Murphy, assistant superintendent of facilities and operations, called the possible increase "the only option for growth as it relates to school construction." This year, the school district didn't receive any money from the Florida Department of Education for construction, and no new schools are getting funded.

Henderson, Young and Company claimed Polk County Schools will enroll about 97,500 students in 2013, a 9 percent increase from current enrollment.

Board Chairman Frank O'Reilly said the possible fee increase is "what needs to be done to make classrooms available to students."

The School Board cannot raise school impact fees itself. If board members see a need to increase the fee, they have to go through the county commission.

The School Board impact fee committee meets next week and will review the firm's findings. Then, the School Board plans to ask commissioners to meet and discuss the issue in mid-October, before commissioners vote on the issue.

kara.phelps@newschief.com

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