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Posted: 5:55 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012

State audit questions how Lake Co. impact fees are spent



LAKE COUNTY, Fla. — A new state audit is questioning how hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on Lake County schools.

The state auditor general said school officials spent impact fee money on items they weren't allowed to.

Up until last year, impact fees collected from the construction of new homes in Lake County were turned over to the school board to build more classrooms. The amount could reach millions of dollars per year. But a new state audit questions how some of that money was spent.

"Under our opinion, impact fee money is used to set up new student stations. We feel we did that appropriately," said Chris Patton, spokesman with Lake County Schools.

Patton said the school system disagrees with findings in the audit.

The report shows \$387,000 was spent on items that, according to the state, don't represent allowable uses of impact fees. But the school board believes classroom equipment qualifies.

"If we're buying technology, buying software to set up that new student station, we feel that's a legitimate expense for impact fees," Patton said.

State auditors also found the district should have gotten a better deal on the \$31 million expansion of Gray Middle School in Groveland, asserting that the district paid \$158,000 too much.

District officials said their own audit found that item, but they dispute the state's position on the impact fees.

"That's really their opinion," Patton said. "And what we'll do next is go to the county and ask for their opinion on how impact fee money is spent."

It's the Lake County Commission that wrote the ordinance on how impact fees should be spent, so if the commission said it's all right, then it is all right.

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