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Hernando busing issue could hinge on impact fee vote

By [MATT REINIG](#)

BROOKSVILLE - After two workshops where Hernando school board members expressed support for returning courtesy busing to the district's youngest and most vulnerable students, board members voted Tuesday to postpone any decision until March 11.

By then, Hernando County commissioners will have taken a final vote on whether to approve the reinstatement of education impact fees on new developments, which would add as much as \$7,000 to the cost of a new single-family home.

Funding from impact fees would help the district pay down its debt and help free up money to pay for the estimated \$7.5 million that Transportation Director Doug Compton said it will cost to reinstate the routes, buses, and staff.

The district will still have time after March 11 to order new buses as long as they act shortly after that, Compton said.

School board members voted more than a year ago to eliminate so-called courtesy busing for students who live within two miles of their zoned schools after the state cut funding for the service.

Though board member Dianne Bonfield was the only one to vote against reducing the busing, she was the strongest opponent to funding a return of the routes Tuesday, citing lack of funds.

She said the onus is on county commissioners now to help free up funding for the district through the reinstatement of education impact fees. The district estimates it has lost about \$2 million since the moratorium on impact fees was enacted.

"I liked (Commissioner Diane Rowden's) idea of phasing (impact fees) in," Bonfield said. "That would help the builders and that would help us, if the builders have been affected at all by this."

The impact fees would allow the district to pay to reverse a decision that school board members have generally regarded as a mistake, board members say.

In the recent past, board members have expressed remorse for voting to allow kindergartners and other young students to walk up to two miles to school. Parents have complained that their children have to walk through bad weather and through neighborhoods where sexual predators live.

The district saved about \$2 million by eliminating the bus routes, and sold 43 buses for \$250,000, district officials said.

The \$7.5 million cost to reinstate the program could become even more expensive in time, said board member John Sweeney.

"There's no time like the present," Sweeney said. "Improving busing will affect attendance, which will affect graduation (rates)."

District officials, including three principals from Parrott Middle, Hernando High, and Powell Middle, said school facilities are falling into disrepair and school budgets are stretched thin as it is. Funding facility repairs trumps the courtesy busing issue, they said.

School Superintendent Lori Romano said she believes the solution to funding a return to courtesy busing can only come from one of two channels: either tax-payers are going to have to pay more taxes to get the buses back, or sacrifices will need to be made in their children's classrooms in the form of reduced staff.

"It has to come from either existing budgets or possible revenue through increased millage rates," she said. "It would be terrible to say we can't get children to schools, but we've cut so thin we have to take it out of classrooms."

County Commissioner Jim Adkins, who was among the majority of commissioners to vote to draft an ordinance extending the education impact fee moratorium, said it is too early to determine which way his vote will go.

First, he said, he wants to hear what the school board's plans are, and how they intend to use the money.

Adkins said his understanding from the school board was the education impact fees would be used to help pay off their debt service.

"I want to look at all the information," Adkins said, adding that he has arranged a meeting with one school board member Wednesday to further discuss the issue. "I'd like to hear from the school board members other than the comments in the paper, whether good, bad, or another, and hopefully we'll know better."

Dave Russell and Wayne Dukes, who were also initially against reinstating the impact fees, could not be reached for comment.

Board members voted 4-1 Tuesday, with Cynthia Moore dissenting, to postpone their discussion until March 11 after the commission meeting.

Romano also said the board may make a unified stand, and presence, during that commission meeting in support of education impact fees.

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