

Builders oppose school impact fees

Published Mon, Feb 9, 2009 12:00 AM

By MICHAEL WELLES SHAPIRO

mshapiro@islandpacket.com

843-706-8142

State Sen. Tom Davis' first major legislative initiative is a controversial measure opposed by many builders because it would impose fees on new homes and apartments to pay for school construction.

Davis, a Beaufort Republican, is holding a public meeting today to discuss the pros and cons of the proposal, which would only affect Beaufort County.

An identical bill, which would affect only Jasper County, was filed by state Sen. Clementa Pinckney, D-Ridgeland, and also will be discussed at the meeting.

Local home builders have pledged to attend the event to express opposition to the measure, which they say would put an onerous burden on their already struggling industry.

Environmental groups and school officials are likewise gearing up, arguing that for years the influx of new residents has taxed the area's ecology, roads and public schools.

"During my campaign, I said we were going to have a public debate on this," said Davis, who was elected in November.

"It may be heated, but it's important to go through with it."

Beaufort County school board members Jim Bequette, who represents Lady's Island, and George Wilson, who represents Okatie and Sun City Hilton Head, have pushed for local governments to charge developers \$6,000 in school impact fees per new home when they approve large-scale developments.

Impact fees for parks, roads and fire protection already are being collected on new homes.

The Coastal Conservation League sent an e-mail Thursday encouraging environmentally minded residents to attend the meeting and urging Davis to follow through with the bill.

Without school impact fees, there will be more referendums about borrowing money to build new schools, the league said.

Benjamin Gecy, a Port Royal developer, said a new impact fee would be passed on to home buyers and could put local builders out of business.

"I have a 26-lot subdivision that I'm ready to start on Lady's Island. But another impact fee could stop me from going forward," he said. "I don't want to come across as the evil developer. We want to pay our fair share, but when it comes to our livelihood and our income, there needs to be some sort of concession."