

Commissioners say 'no' to Monforton impact fees

By JESSICA MAYRER Chronicle Staff Writer

Gallatin County Commissioners said 'no' to easing Monforton School's growing pains by charging builders a fee for new homes constructed in the school district, though parents, trustees and administrators pled their case for overburdened infrastructure.

As it stands, the school district is legally required to pay for improvements and expansion with bond measures, which must be approved by voters, said Monforton School Board Trustee Gary Griffith.

"That puts the entire burden on existing taxpayers," Griffith said.

But if builders were to pay impact fees, costs would be shared more equitably, he said. It doesn't make sense for existing property owners to foot the bill when it's largely new development bringing new students into the district and straining the school, Griffith said.

"There is growth going on in the district and it is causing a reduction in the quality of education," said Clint Little, an engineer commissioned by Monforton to conduct an impact-fee study.

Several local residents argued during the regularly scheduled commissioners' meeting that funding education needs to be a priority.

"We wish to live in a civilized society," said Diane Elliott. "And in order to live in one, we must have educated people."

Belgrade Schools Superintendent Herb Benz said if Belgrade voters turn down an upcoming bond measure to finance construction costs to accommodate steadily expanding enrollment, they could have little choice but to pursue impact fees.

"The question is, 'How do you finance these things?'" he asked.

But, others said, enough is enough.

"It seems to me like they never have enough," said area resident Clinton Cain. "They always want more and more."

Commission Chairman Steve White wondered how the county could rationalize charging every new home a flat fee, when Monforton's projections estimate only one in four new homeowners would have a school-aged child.

"You've got three households that have no impact on the school, yet they're going to be required to pay in," White

said.

Local real estate agent Dennis Hardin said approving Monforton's request would leave the county vulnerable to lawsuits, skew property values and create a chaotic and unequal school-funding puzzle.

He also cautioned commissioners against setting a precedent as the Montana Legislature hashes out the issue. One bill now in the Legislature would prevent schools from collecting impact fees altogether.

"What Gallatin County does becomes a rudder in the water and drives decisions in other areas," Hardin said.

Skinner said, for now, it's best to leave the school-funding dilemma in Helena.

"Whatever decision we make will be used as a bully pulpit right now," Skinner said.

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