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County Awards Impact Fee Consulting Contract

By JIM KONKOLY

Highlands Today

Highlands County commissioners awarded a \$110,000 contract to the consulting firm of Duncan & Associates for a study on impact fees.

The firm will work with the 11-member Impact Fee Review Committee and conduct an in-depth study of the county's impact fees, charged on new construction to finance new infrastructure needed due to growth.

Commissioner Jeff Carlson cast the lone "no" vote on the contract. Carlson said the consulting firm is needed to work with the citizens review committee, but he feels the school board should pay a larger share of the study's cost.

As it stands now, the school board will be assessed \$13,758 for the consulting contract.

County Administrator Michael Wright said he will talk with school officials about increasing their share for the consultant's contract.

In the last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, the county collected \$1,634,097 for its seven impact fees, to cover growth in transportation, parks and recreation, fire departments, libraries, EMS, law enforcement and corrections facilities. Due to the recession, collections were down by more than \$700,000 from county budget projections.

Impact fee collections for the school board totaled \$681,211 in fiscal year 2007-08.

Hill-Gustat To Get New Sidewalks

Commissioners voted Tuesday to build a sidewalk along Cougar Boulevard, primarily for the safety of students walking to and from Hill-Gustat Middle School.

"We will be addressing the most critical part of the master plan for the Safe Route to Schools" program with this project, county engineer Ramon Gavarrete said.

The new sidewalk will run for about 3,500 feet along the east side of Cougar Boulevard (formerly Western Avenue), from Schumacher Road to Ferrari Drive.

Commissioners allocated \$107,258 for the project to cover the estimated cost.

Between 100 to 150 Hill-Gustat students per day are walking along the edge of Cougar Boulevard to get to and from school, Gavarrete said.

Due to the slowdown in construction, Gavarrete said he expects lower bid prices for the project than in past years. Construction is expected to start this spring.

Future sidewalk construction projects for routes to Hill-Gustat Middle School planned by the county include: along Cougar Boulevard from Ferrari Drive to Thunderbird Road; on Thunderbird from Cougar Boulevard to Corvette Avenue; and on Corvette Avenue from Thunderbird Road to New Life Way.

In other business, commissioners learned that the county will save about \$937,000 per year on liability, property and worker's compensation insurance. Commissioners approved a new contract with Public Risk Insurance Agency at a cost of about \$1,160,000 for one year, down from the current annual cost of \$2.1 million.

"We've had no hurricanes here for several years, and so the market has softened and prices have gone down," said John Minor, county director of human resources and risk management.