



Hernando School Board abandoning impact fee is public disservice

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The Hernando School Board needs to review its own lessons on district finances. Five weeks ago, a board majority publicly lobbied county commissioners to lift a moratorium on school impact fees. Five days ago, the board declined to pay for its share of a study to justify an updated fee.

It is short-sighted and indicative of board members who would rather surrender than provide accurate, up-to-date data to better press their case. Their lack of convictions is embarrassing.

The board, on a tie vote, declined to pay \$30,000 for a study to devise an updated impact fee based on current construction costs. By doing so, board acquiesced to the same misguided logic that dominates the commission chambers – that delaying a decision is beneficial to the politically influential residential construction industry which wants the fees to remain at zero. This subterfuge must end. The longer the stalling continues the greater the likelihood the costs of serving future growth will fall unfairly to all property taxpayers.

In late October, commissioners said they wanted a new study before restoring a school impact fee of \$4,266 per single family home. That fee, adopted in 2005, was cut in half in 2009 and then waived entirely in 2011 in a failed strategy to stimulate the construction industry.

In a show of benevolence that also guaranteed delaying their final decision by up to nine months, commissioners agreed to pay for half of the study's projected \$60,000 cost. But, Tuesday night, the School Board couldn't muster three votes to pay the other half. Board members Gus Guadagnino, elected in November, and Matt Foreman refused to authorize the appropriation. Board member Cynthia Moore was absent.

Foreman and Guadagnino said the spending made no sense since commissioners have shown little support for restoring the impact fees. That sentiment is a failure of their fiduciary responsibilities to the taxpayers of Hernando County.

They should study the data the School Board previously provided to the county: The district has lost roughly \$1 million in waived impact fees since 2009; the district is more than 200 students above state projections for the current school year; district debt service payments double to \$9.6 million for the next three years, and, for the past two years, the state Legislature has allocated no money to school districts for capital construction. Left unsaid is that a voter-approved half-cent sales tax for school construction expires in 2014 and nobody appears willing to ask for a renewal.

The loss of impact fees means the loss of money to build new classrooms. With no financial help from Tallahassee and with new residents failing to contribute their fair and legally justifiable share via impact fees, the expense of providing future school facilities will fall to all residential property owners. The alternative is to buy portable classrooms or add more students to existing classrooms - a violation of the state class-size amendment.

Foreman and Guadagnino are wrong to categorize the shared cost of impact fee study as reckless roll of the dice. More accurately, it is a short-term investment intended to yield a long-term and equitable way to pay for classrooms.

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