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Impact fees, federal stimulus discussed

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BRADENTON — As Manatee County commissioners get ready to vote on a two-year impact fee moratorium today, they want to know if their counterparts at the school board are willing to do the same.

In a budget workshop Monday, Superintendent Tim McGonegal relayed the question to school board members — a month after the board agreed to suspend charging the fees for a year to help stimulate the local construction industry.

Board members can't vote during a workshop, but McGonegal surveyed each member on their thoughts.

McGonegal said he recommends the county's two-year moratorium.

"It's so limited on what you can spend it on," he said.

The new home fees, that are ultimately passed on to homebuyers, can only be used to create student stations, he said.

One year's suspension of the fees would mean \$5 million of loss in revenue to the school district.

School board members Harry Kinnan, Jane Pfeilsticker and Bob Gause said they do not like the idea, as they do not know how the district's financial health will be in a year's time.

"I want to maintain our ability to make another choice in another year," Pfeilsticker said. "We don't know what our situation will be in one year."

School board members Walter Miller and Barbara Harvey said they are fine with a two-year suspension.

"We need to send a message to the community that we are on the same page as the county," Harvey said. "The number of empty seats we have now and the influx of students would not fill those seats in two years."

The district is expected to grow by 15 students next school year.

Prior to the impact fees discussion, board members were also given a chance to review the K-12 education budget passed by the house and senate last week and received an update on the federal stimulus package.

Under both chambers' plans, the district would receive about \$287.3 million to \$288.1 million for its operating fund, which pays for salaries and utilities. The plans would inject about \$1 million to \$1.8 million more into the operating budget compared to this year, and both chambers managed the infusion by transferring revenues from capital funds.

That means the district will lose \$6.3 million next school year, according to estimates.

The district's really not getting extra money and the plans are murky, said Jim Drake, assistant superintendent of finances.

Both chambers also rely on the federal stimulus to help ease operating costs for schools. Manatee is slated to get \$14 million to help supplement the district's operating coffers.

"But there is still no waiver, but people are saying we will get the waiver but we don't know when," Drake said.

The district will be receiving \$6.1 million to help low income schools and \$9.6 million more for special education programs. There are also grants the district can apply for under the stimulus.

The district would also have to wait until all the bigger districts in Florida get their share of a capital outlay stimulus before the remainder — about \$106 million — can be reallocated to other districts, Drake said.

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