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Article published Oct 15, 2007

## OUR OPINION

### Gauging the impact of schools

Marion County commissioners and School Board had a meeting of the minds last week, seemingly reaching an accord on some issues. But one sticking point was over who should pay for new growth's needs like road improvements and water and sewer lines.

The two boards could achieve unity on this as well, if the School Board would be willing to adjust its impact fee upwardly to meet the need.

Last year, the commission adopted the impact fee on the school system's behalf, but grudgingly so. Commissioners argued, correctly, that the charge was better than no impact fee at all, but was too low at \$3,517 per new single-family home - especially considering the School Board's consultant originally proposed almost \$9,000.

Jacking up the impact fee won't erase the nearly \$500 million in short-term school construction needs overnight. But the School Board, which to its credit successfully convinced voters to support a half-cent sales tax to fund almost \$100 million of its building needs, does the community a disservice if it doesn't seek to capture as much revenue as possible from new growth.

Both panels committed to holding off on a sweeping countywide policy until a Hillsborough County lawsuit is settled. There, school officials have sued the county government seeking clarification of the schools' financial responsibility for new infrastructure. Hillsborough educators argue that they are only responsible for improvements "adjacent to or immediately abutting" a school, while the county wants them to pay for more.

Marion School Board Chairman Ron Crawford told the Star-Banner he believes the judge's decision in that case will set a precedent for such instances, and that our school system will abide by the ruling.

What will be interesting is how the School Board reacts if the Hillsborough County case supports a point made by the Marion County Commission the other day: that is, the school system is in essence a developer and should be

held to the same standards on the impact of growth as any other developer. Would that be enough to force them to seek higher impact fees?

Ultimately, state law says the two sides must jointly enact a growth-management strategy by May 1. For too long, the County Commission failed to listen to the school system as they merrily approved thousands of new homes each year. Now, state law says they must include the School Board before doing so.

Despite their new input, the School Board should listen now and press on with raising the impact fee, in the range of the initial proposal. It's not the only answer, but it's better than no answer at all.

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