

Impact fees will go up — but not as much as before

By Kelly Tyko

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STUART — The Martin County School Board could decide next week what to do about school impact fees.

On Wednesday, the School Board conducted a six-hour workshop on impact fees and the costs of school construction. Next Tuesday, the board could choose to approve a new proposal that would raise impact fees on new houses by about 22.5 percent, instead of doubling the fees, which board members approved in August.

"It's a very tough decision," School Board Chairwoman Laurie Gaylord said. "Growth must pay for itself, and just the fact that this board has taken another look at this, I think just shows that we want to do the right thing."

Uncertainty about property taxes, growth and the economy prompted Martin County officials to rethink a proposal to dramatically raise the impact fees on new development. The county's Impact Fee Review Committee did not approve the impact fees the School Board approved in August or other impact fees proposed.

The County Commission will need to approve any changes.

In August, the School Board approved increasing school impact fees on a new 2,000-square-foot house from \$4,555 to \$8,680. In a new proposal by economic consultant James Nicholas, a retired University of Florida professor, the impact fee on a 2,000-square-foot house would rise to \$5,567.

"I don't see anything wrong with what you already approved. Part of it is a timing question," Nicholas said Wednesday, adding that school construction costs have grown around the nation by about 13 percent per year.

Tuesday's meeting starts at 7 p.m. and will be at school district headquarters, 500 E. Ocean Blvd., in Stuart.

Also at Wednesday's workshop, a consultant told the School Board that the estimated \$23 million it's paying to build a new school in western Palm City appears reasonable.

Praveen Ommi, with a Miami-based construction consulting firm, said the increases in costs from 2004 to 2007 is consistent with the increase in construction costs in South Florida.

However, some local business leaders and residents disagreed and said they thought the costs should be going down.



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