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More or less? School board reconsidering impact fees

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By **BETH REESE CRAVEY**, My Clay Sun

In May, the Clay County School Board will reconsider the amount of the educational impact fee, which was first imposed on new residential development in 2003.

State law requires a review of the impact fee every two years. The first time around, the fee was boosted. This time around, the board can legally justify an increase or decrease or maintaining the current amount, according to a consultant's report.

But during a preliminary discussion last week, four of the five board members were inclined to keep the status quo or decrease the fee, citing the sluggish economy and housing market.

"We know the economy is pretty stinky right now," said board Chairwoman Carol Studdard. "I'm wondering how much the public can stand."

Another factor to consider is the road impact fee approved by the County Commission to take affect in January. The board does not have the authority to impose or change an impact fee and has to ask the commission to do so. Whether commissioners would consider increasing one fee three months after approving another is questionable, board members said.

Also, increasing the educational fee could worsen the local housing market, which is in such doldrums that revenues from the existing impact fee have fallen far short of projections, said Mike Elliott, assistant superintendent for support services. When the fee was first enacted at a lower rate than the current amount, revenue was about \$13 million; it has since dropped to \$7 million and the current estimate is about \$3.5 million.

"People are being hard pressed to make their payments. People are being hard pressed to fund new houses," Elliott said. "This has a bearing on the county as a whole. This is bigger than us."

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Whether reducing the fee could help the housing market is hard to determine, he said.

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"Will a certain [fee] number generate a spark, or assist with a spark?" he said.

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Board member Wayne Bolla suggested that a higher impact fee might help the school district, which has been faced in recent years with insufficient funding to accommodate growth. A higher fee, he said, could translate to fewer new homes.

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"If we have less growth, we need less classrooms ... and have more money," he said. "We're talking about breathing space."

Other board members disagreed. Enrollment growth has slowed this year, but the district is still behind in capacity because of the rapid growth of past years, board member Lisa Graham said.

"We are playing catch up," she said. "That doesn't mean we quit buying property. We have to look ahead."

The Northeast Florida Builders Association, which opposed the educational impact fee and recently filed a lawsuit against the pending county fee, is keeping a close eye on the deliberations.

Spokesman Corey Deal, who attended last week's meeting, said in an e-mail to association members that Bolla "seemed to think that no new homes equals no new students so no new revenue would be needed. He failed to take into consideration growth from within the county." But Deal said in the e-mail that board concerns about the local housing market were "encouraging."

The educational fee, imposed on all new residential development, is currently \$7,034 on single-family homes, \$3,236 for multi-family units and \$5,979 for mobile homes.

The road fee would be imposed on all new development but the amount would vary, depending on the type and location of the development. Single-family residential fees will range from \$4,341 in the southwest part of Clay County to \$5,814 in the northeast.

WANT TO GO?

On May 15, the Clay County School Board will decide whether to change the amount of the educational impact fee. The meeting is at 7 p.m. at the Teacher Training Center, Fleming Island High, 2233 Village Square Parkway, Orange Park.~~~**GIVE BOARD MEMBERS YOUR OPINION**

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