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### School impact fee remains undecided

**A half-cent sales tax won't work, the board says: It would lose other taxes.**

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As Orange and Seminole counties raised school-impact fees this week, Lake school officials are still fighting to justify raising their fees for new development.

Their biggest hurdle to date seems to be a Lake County-appointed impact-fee study group, which suggested the School Board shouldn't charge interest when asking new residents to help pay for new schools.

Instead, the School Board should seek a half-cent sales tax to pay for financing costs, the group said last week.

The solution would lower the School Board's asking price from \$14,646 to \$9,324 per new single-family home and perhaps make the increase more appealing for the County Commission to pass.

But school officials say there's no way they can ask voters for a half-cent sales tax. The school district has an agreement with the county and Lake's cities to split a one-cent sales tax. Asking voters for another sales tax would forfeit the district's third of the tax revenue, officials said.

So the study group's solution, School Board members say, isn't really a solution at all. Jimmy Conner called it a "pipe dream." Cindy Barrow said it was a "red herring."

Board member Scott Strong called the group's recommendations a "smoke screen" to draw attention from the financial needs of the district and instead focus on what the higher fees might do to a slumping home-building economy.

"Everybody walked in there with their minds made up. . . . They didn't want to squelch economic growth," Strong said. "They're putting growth in front of children's needs. Period."

The impact-fee committee chairwoman, Jean Kaminski, said the sales-tax suggestion has been "blown out of proportion."

"It was not a mandate or a directive or anything," Kaminski said Wednesday. "It was a 'Let's explore it,



see if it's a possibility.' "

Now that it seems that a sales-tax isn't a possibility, the suggestion is just about null and void, she said.

Board members have been skeptical about potential bias from the impact-fee study committee. Kaminski, for example, is the executive director of the Lake County Home Builders Association.

Kaminski said the chairmanship isn't a title she sought. The committee nominated her, she said.

"I strictly look at these studies as the validity of the data," Kaminski said. "I am one vote and I've tried very hard to ask questions that I would ask whether I was a committee person or a chairman." The study group's suggested \$9,324 rate is about \$2,300 more than the current \$7,055 fee.

The board's recommended rate of \$14,646 is more than double the current rate. It would also be the second highest school-impact fee rate in the nation, if passed.

The board based its rate on an impact-fee consultant's findings for Lake County. Board members said they included borrowing costs to include everything it would take to build new schools for new residents.

"The only way you can avoid that [borrowing costs] is if you have the cash on hand. I don't know why that's such an intellectual leap for people," said Board Chairman Larry Metz. "Unless you have cash on hand, you have to have the financing."

It shouldn't be the new residents' problem if the board can't pay construction costs upfront, Kaminski said.

Board members said impact fees are the only viable way to build schools to keep up with growth.

Orange County became the state's highest school-impact fee district this week when commissioners unanimously raised the rate to \$11,829 for single-family homes. Seminole raised its school-impact fee to \$5,068, its first increase since the fee was implemented in 1992.

Metz said it's hard to compare neighboring counties' fees to Lake's because the others have more tax revenues from commercial properties.

"They have theme parks. They have commercial. They have businesses that we don't have in Lake County. They have a lot more money coming in than we do," Metz said.

The Lake County Commission must approve the new fee before it goes into effect. It remains to be seen whether commissioners will side with the School Board or the study group. The county is expected to discuss the issue during a Nov. 20 workshop and decide at a Dec. 11 public hearing.

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