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Lake County erred on impact-fee decision for schools

Cindy Barrow

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I am disappointed in the decision of two of our county commissioners to disregard the cost to the school district for borrowing money to build new schools needed because of growth. Both Brevard and Palm Beach counties have included those fees in the past.

Why is the Lake County School Board's borrowing cost so high compared with other counties?

*Lake County does not have any sizable commercial industry that pays into our tax pool and contributes significantly to our economy.

*Lake residents are the largest contributor to school taxes and therefore the School Board does not collect the amount of taxes collected in other counties.

*Although the Lake School Board has had some land donations for schools recently, the board has had to pay to acquire land for schools.

*Because Lake County has no substantial commercial industry and because the home-building industry is virtually the largest industry in Lake, we are a tax-poor county.

*The Lake County School Board has to borrow money to build new schools, which includes paying money for the land as well.

The big question is whether you, the taxpayer, should pay for the interest to finance new schools needed as a result of new residential growth. County commissioners said that you should pay, by virtue of their vote on Tuesday evening. (Commissioners Elaine Renick and Linda Stewart felt otherwise; however, they could not persuade their colleagues to vote for borrowing costs.)

Simply put, if you build your own home, you must buy the land, put some money down to build your house, and finance the rest. The School Board does the same when building new schools. We cannot choose to pay the principal only, just as you cannot tell the bank that you refuse to pay interest.

The central debate is who should pay for the interest on the loans to build new schools as a result of new growth brought to us by residential builders -- current taxpayers or residential developers. By virtue of

the County Commission's vote, it will be current taxpayers.

The School Board will be able to finance less debt for more new schools as time goes on (because the more we finance, the less the lenders will approve for us to borrow more money into the future) and our ability to build the schools needed will be compromised because of the continuous financing of debt.

Until the state steps up to fund public schools as mandated in the Florida Constitution, local governments are left to bear the burden.

There are prices to pay for every decision that we make in government. After local governments decided to approve new residential housing at a growth rate that did not allow proper planning, we are all paying the price and we will continue to do so in the future.

Cindy Barrow of Clermont is a Lake County School Board member.

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