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### School Board to discuss countywide tax hike to make up for impact fees

By Erica Rodriguez, Orlando Sentinel

11:08 AM EST, February 13, 2012

TAVARES — School Board members say they want to sit down with county commissioners to discuss them supporting a higher impact fee or a tax hike so they can have the funds to run the school district.

Board members debated at a workshop this week whether to ask commissioners to levy a countywide tax of 50 cents for each \$1,000 of taxable home value to help make up the difference for the loss in impact fees. The tax could infuse the district with about \$9 million to help with maintenance issues at old schools, buses and a long list of unfunded school projects.

"What we're trying to do is find a balance that meets the economic situation that we're facing as well as the educational needs that we're required to meet," said board member Tod Howard who, along with board member Kyleen Fischer supports the tax increase in exchange for suspending future impact fees.

Fellow School Board members were lukewarm about the idea. Board Chairwoman Rosanne Brandeburg said she's open to discussion and plans to have school staff present commissioners with the district's financial and building needs when the two groups meet.

The district has lost about \$18 million in tax revenue for capital improvements and about \$19 million in impact fees since 2007. It has about \$302 million of unfunded building projects, \$35 million of unfunded maintenance projects and a long list of technology and transportation needs over the next five years. This year, the district used \$30 million of saved impact fees to start expansions and renovations at Eustis Heights Elementary, Mount Dora Middle School and two other campuses. Without the funds, the district would have to rely mostly on declining tax revenues to fund growth-related building.

"We need to be generating some kind of revenue from somewhere," Brandeburg said.

Impact fees have been a source of contention between the two boards since commissioners suspended them last year to try to jump start the economy.

School officials say the 15-month suspension has cost the cash-strapped district about \$6 million.

Last fall, the School Board approved a study that recommends an impact-fee increase from a \$9,324 rate to \$10,292 for single-family homes, but they couldn't agree whether that was a fair amount to charge.

Both boards are under pressure from home builders to keep suspending the fees. Builders argue the fees make it costly to build and that suspending them encourages construction.

But commissioners may be reluctant about raising taxes in a year when many of them are up for re-election.

"That's not going to fly with the public," said Commissioner Jimmy Conner, a former longtime School Board member who is running for re-election.

The school impact fee suspension ends April 1, but commissioners could temporarily extend it to have more time to make a long-term choice.

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Commissioner Welton Caldwell said commissioners should take time to make an educated decision and not to "let that date scare us into moving too quick."

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