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Pasco growth forces council to look at school impact fees

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Adopting Pasco School District's capital facilities plan would be the same as supporting a school impact fee, Pasco City Council members were told Monday.

The council still would need to pass a fee ordinance, but adopting the district's plan without the impact fee would be failing to implement it, Pasco City Manager Gary Crutchfield told the council.

The Pasco School District told the city more than a year ago that enrollment growth, which has averaged 6 to 7 percent a year for the last decade, has outstripped the district's ability to house new students.

The district is expected to grow from about 15,600 students this year to more than 21,000 students by 2017.

The city is being asked to adopt the school district's 2011-17 school capital facilities plan as part of its comprehensive plan.

The district will need to build five elementary schools, which could include one early learning center for kindergartners, add portables at the elementary schools and add capacity at the high school to meet the anticipated growth, according to the district's capital plan.

The funding plan for those buildings include school bonds, state matching money and school impact fees, according to the plan.

Major changes proposed in the plan include moving sixth grade to the elementary schools, which would postpone the need for a new middle school, said Rick White, Pasco community and economic development director. Middle schools are more expensive to build than elementary schools.

And portables also are acknowledged as part of the district's permanent classroom space, White said.

The school district will add another 24 portables this summer, said John Morgan, the school district's director of operations. But they are running out of space to put portables.

The district is examining multi-track year-round school, which would be more expensive than the traditional school system but would add to capacity, Morgan said.

Even with all those measures, school impact fees are needed, he said.

Since there is no school impact fee now, the district is asking the city and Franklin County to require developers to negotiate a payment when new subdivisions go through the state Environmental Policy Act and platting process. The district must ask for the fee for each project and must negotiate individually with each developer to set that amount.

The only other option is an ordinance that would automatically require impact fees on new home construction when building permits are issued.

The fee suggested by the district's plan is \$4,683.34 for a single-family home and \$4,525.86 per multi-family residence.

The city already has about 1,500 single-family lots in some form of approval, White said. That is about three years of inventory and would likely bring 700 new elementary school students and 275 each of middle and high school students.

Under the mitigation fee process the school district is currently using, only new subdivisions would have to pay the fee. A school impact fee would apply to new lots and already approved lots, according to city staff.

Councilman Al Yenny said having school impact fees apply to approved lots goes against property rights. It would be more equitable if the fee could be on all home sales.

Crutchfield said current law doesn't allow that. And when it has been suggested, real estate agents have fought it.

Pasco Mayor Matt Watkins said he is troubled that the district's space dilemma has reached its current point. The council needs to adopt the district's facilities plan and consider how to assess the fee.

"I'm not afraid of a house costing a few more thousand," he said.

The majority of Pasco residents seem to agree with Watkins. In a recent survey, about 79 percent of respondents said they would support impact fees assessed on all new home construction to pay for a portion of new school construction costs. In total, about 20 percent were opposed.

The planning commission recommended the city adopt the district's capital facilities plan and approve a school impact fee, White said.

The council could vote on the district's capital facilities plan next week.

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