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## News

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### School board ponders fee's

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future; facing a massive revenue shortfall, some are reluctant to forego income

BY AL KROMBACH

Palatka Daily News

Impact fees dominated discussion at the Putnam County School Board meeting Tuesday, with Superintendent Tom Townsend saying "It would be my recommendation at this time not to do away with impact fees."

Later, he said that while a temporary suspension of the fees might cost the district \$100,000 to \$200,000, "I don't want to get in a battle with our citizens or the county commission. Two hundred thousand dollars is not going to make or break us."

Townsend said it is more important that everyone agree to work together and pressure the Florida Legislature to properly fund education.

In 2008, Putnam County Commissioners began to talk about suspending or eliminating impact fees as a means to stimulate construction in the county.

School board members joined the discussion in a joint meeting with the commission in January. It appeared then that most county commissioners favored a temporary suspension of the fees, six months being the most-often-mentioned number, while school board members were more cautious.

The fees, implemented in 2007, are levied on new construction to partially shift the costs generated by population growth to newcomers. Putnam County collects about \$7,000 in fees on a single-family residence; more than \$4,000 of that is the school portion.

The school system has banked more than \$873,000 since the fee's inception.

The County Commission enacts the fee ordinance and collects the money. At a recent meeting, some commissioners favored suspending the school board's portion of the fee whether the school board concurs or not.

School board member John Milton said he favors keeping the fees, saying the board must look at the long-term prospects for growth, not the immediate situation. He said he is willing to consider a short-term moratorium, perhaps 90 days, to see if there's "a burst of activity, if the impact fee is having any impact. I don't think it is."

Contractor David Dwyer urged the board to reduce or suspend the fees, saying the jobs of many Putnam Countians depend on the construction industry.

The school impact fee question will be put on the Feb. 17 meeting agenda for a possible vote. The county commission is slated to vote on a possible fee suspension on Feb. 24.

In other business, the board heard financial reports from Associate Superintendent Sam Foerster. In one, he said there is a negative correlation between per-student spending and school test scores; that is, the county schools where the most money is spent have some of the lowest achievement records.

In another report called a "working document," Foerster listed a number of possible cuts that would result in a potential savings of \$4.3 million in payroll and benefit expenses. That still leaves a shortfall of some \$6.4 million in next year's payroll and benefit budget, he noted.

The next scheduled school board meeting will be at 3:30 p.m. Feb. 17 at the Campbell Administration Building, 200 S. Seventh St. Meetings are open to the public.

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