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School fee raise defeated

By KEVIN WIATROWSKI

kwiatrowski@tampatrib.com

Despite the urging of Pasco County school officials, county commissioners Tuesday declined to adopt impact fees to support school construction, recommending school officials look at phasing in the increased fee.

School officials wanted the fee - \$8,606 per new house - to go into effect in January. It is nearly double the \$4,800 per house the school district charges.

School board members approved the fees in February. With the county commission's approval, the fee would have increased the \$13,000 the county now adds to the cost of each new house to offset the demand growth puts on roads, parks, schools and other public facilities.

Now, county and school board officials will try to negotiate a plan to phase-in the increase in school impact fees over three years.

The county needs to sign off on any impact fee increase because it issues building permits, regulates construction in Pasco and collects the money.

The impact fee increase is needed to help deal with overpopulation at schools, about half of which are over capacity, school officials said.

"We're still in a catch-up mode, trying to catch up with the growth that went on," Chris Williams, the school district's chief planner, told commissioners.

In a letter asking commissioners to adopt the fee, schools Superintendent Heather Fiorentino said nine of the county's 11 high schools are over capacity. Nearly half the county's middle and elementary schools also are serving more students than they were designed for, Fiorentino said.

Commissioner Ted Schrader recommended school officials phase in their fee. A sudden increase could create a backlash among developers already hard-pressed to sell houses, he said.

Schrader also asked school officials to set aside part of the new impact fee funds to pay for nearby road and traffic improvements new schools often need. Paying for those off-site improvements has become a long-running debate between school district and county officials, who often end up picking up the tab.

Williams said he was unsure school board members would support Schrader's suggestion, because it would reduce the amount that could be applied to schools, buses and other student-related infrastructure.

School officials expect their rolls to grow by 300 students next year, but that could be higher as the economy improves in the coming years, Williams said. The school population could grow faster than a graduated impact fee, making it hard for the district to keep up.

Higher impact fees could put Pasco County at a disadvantage, compared with Hillsborough and neighboring counties that charge lower fees, Commissioner Michael Cox said.

"We've got to take a look at finding a different way to finance this growth," he said.