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Monday, Mar 23, 2009

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Posted on Thu, Mar. 19, 2009

## **Schools consider impact-fee freeze**

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MANATEE — With no student growth and the economic downturn, the Manatee County school board wants to give builders a break through a moratorium on impact fees.

On Monday, board members will consider waiving for one year impact fees charged for new homes.

Though the district may lose \$5 million in revenue for the 2009-10 school year, some school board members hope it would help spur the local building and real-estate industries.

"In our present position, growth has stopped. We find ourselves with several thousand empty seats in schools," said Walter Miller, chairman of the school board. "How can we say we need impact fees when we have so many empty seats in our schools?"

The move is welcomed by local builders, who say unincorporated Manatee has one of the higher impact fee rates in the state.

"I think it's good news," said Alan Anderson, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Manatee County. "We have been looking for this kind of support from government. . . . It's something that needs to be tried to see if it will stimulate the market."

The fees on new homes charged by municipalities and school districts typically go toward building new roads and adding student capacity in schools.

The one-time fee is usually passed on to homeowners, which results in higher home prices, Anderson said. A single-family, three-bedroom home in unincorporated Manatee County is levied an average of \$17,500 in impact fees.

The school district's estimated portion of the fees for single-family homes is about \$6,200, said Jim Drake, the district's assistant superintendent of finances.

Adopted in 2002, impact fees were meant to offset costs to the district at a time when students were flocking to Manatee County.

During the real estate market boom, Manatee schools had to scramble to accommodate an additional 1,100 to 1,300 students a year, Drake said. But in the past three years, the district's student population has stalled. This school year, the district has only five new students.

For now, a one-year moratorium would not severely affect the district's already pinched budget for next school year, Drake said.

"It has a potential to create an issue a couple of years down the road, when growth starts picking up again," he said. "We may not have the money to add student capacity. But again, that's more of a long-range issue."

The idea of freezing impact fees temporarily is being pondered by local lawmakers and governments.

The Bradenton City Council is considering a similar moratorium on new construction in the city. And in Tallahassee, Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, has filed a bill that would impose a three-year moratorium statewide.

If lawmakers were to pass the three-year freeze, that would supersede the school board's decision, Miller said.

"We're not calling the moratorium forever, just for now," Miller said. "Once we begin to see the seats in our schools are filled, we will revisit the issue of impact fees."

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