

Wisdom of investing in schools escapes commissioners

By [C.T. Bowen](#), Times editorial staff

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Hernando's County Commission and School Board members gathered in the same room this week, congratulated themselves for doing so and talked about the need to get together more often to work through shared concerns.

Then they spent three hours talking but not listening.

By the close of the meeting, it was clear two commissioners (and likely a third who was absent) will ignore the School Board majority seeking to restore school impact fees to pay for classroom construction.

They didn't kill the idea entirely, just went for the stall tactic. Commission Chairman Wayne Dukes was so eager to delay a renewed impact fee he even offered to spend county money on a school district study. That is an extraordinary offer from the tight-fisted Dukes, considering the cash-strapped commission is burning through its reserve account as if it was filled with Monopoly money.

The joint County Commission-School Board meeting came because the yearlong moratorium on collecting impact fees in Hernando County is about to expire. In 2005, Hernando County increased its fees to more than \$9,000 for each new home to offset the demands on schools, roads, public safety and other government services. To appease the struggling building industry, the commission cut the fees roughly in half in 2009 and when that didn't work, the commission eliminated them entirely in November 2011.

The suspension was supposed to be temporary, but builders now want it continued. The School Board majority does not. They made their case in person to the commission:

- The district has lost more than \$500,000 in waived impact fees since 2009;
- Despite stagnant population growth, the district is more than 200 students above the state projection in the current school year;
- Several schools face looming crowding;
- The school district's debt service is more than doubling to \$9.6 million for the next three years;
- The half-cent sales tax for school construction expires in 2014 and, so far, nobody has indicated a willingness to ask voters for a renewal;
- For the past two years, the state Legislature has allocated no money to school districts for capital construction;
- The district's tax rate is established by the Legislature in Tallahassee, not by the School Board in Brooksville.

That means the School Board must rely on legislators (via property tax rates), county commissioners (via impact fee ordinances) and voters (via the sales tax referendum) for its money. So, the board asked the county to re-establish the school impact fee of \$4,200 per single-family home until it could commission a study to set an updated figure tied to current construction costs.

Two lame-duck commissioners were willing to meet the School Board half-way. Commissioners John Druzbeck and Jeff Stabins said they would restore the school impact fee to approximately \$2,400 until a consultant could be retained and an updated study completed. Dukes and Commissioner David Russell balked, saying they needed the new figures — which is likely six to nine months away. Commissioner Jim Adkins, who is up for election Tuesday, left the meeting early and will provide the swing vote when the matter is considered formally on Nov. 13.

The builders, of course, want the figure to remain at zero and touted a 34 percent jump in single-family home construction permits (89 to 119) for the first nine months of the year. Here's more relevant data:

Since March 2011, neighboring Pasco County has charged approximately \$12,000 in impact fees for each new home including nearly \$5,000 earmarked for school construction. Remember, for the past year, Hernando County has charged nothing.

So how has this economic stimulus worked? In Pasco, the county issues a monthly average of 87 building permits for new single-family homes. In Hernando, that number is 13. Put another way, the building activity in Pasco is nearly six times greater than in Hernando County despite Pasco's pricey impact fee on new home construction. And the number can't be attributed exclusively to Pasco's larger population. On a per-capita basis, Pasco's building permits are being issued at a rate three times higher than in Hernando.

And, as an aside, Pasco voters will be asked on Tuesday to extend until 2024 that county's penny-on-the-dollar sales tax, half of which goes for school construction.

Hernando County's builders are not at a competitive price disadvantage now and they will not be in the future if the commission restores half the school impact fee for the next nine months.

The competitive disadvantage belongs to the school children in Hernando County and, by extension, the entire community. That will be the result if the only guys willing to invest in education are the two commissioners about to leave office.

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