

# School impact fee hardly begins to meet unfunded needs

*By Dan Lobeck*

*Published as a Guest Column in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune October 24, 2015*

On Oct. 20, 2015, Sarasota County School Board members betrayed taxpayers and schoolchildren and bowed instead to the developers who bankroll their campaigns.

The School Board adopted a very low school impact fee on new residential development — less than 26 percent of the full fee recommended by their expert consultant. It will be the third lowest school impact fee in Florida.

This despite an unfunded need of \$326 million to build at least six new schools over the next 10 years, mainly to serve urban sprawl east of the interstate and south of Venice. The new low fee will cover only 13 percent of that cost, putting 87 percent of the expense on the backs of the tax-paying public.

So how will the School Board pay for new schools? Even the recommended full fee would only pay half of the cost, but with 87 percent unfunded the shortfall is severe.

The School Board, through its state association, is trying to get the Legislature to raise our school property taxes.

In the likely event that fails (and partly if it succeeds), \$284 million in tax revenue (directly and to repay new debt) will be stolen from the needs of existing schools.

Already, money is short for needed school maintenance and repairs, renovations, computers and technology, energy-saving improvements, equipment and even “school physical security with better access control and fencing,” according to an August report by School Board staff.

Yet, amazingly, instead of making developers pay a full impact fee, the School Board has chosen to neglect those needs, and others, even more.

And then there’s the diversion of funds needed to expand existing schools.

Sarasota County schools are bursting at the seams. Most elementary schools are beyond or near capacity (with many students placed in portables), and high schools face a similar problem, particularly in south county. Middle schools are not far behind. On Oct. 6, school staff reported this crisis to the School Board, causing board member Caroline Zucker to lament, “How did we get so far behind?”

Maybe because the School Board suspended impact fees entirely for the past five years, although enrollment increased, and kept impact fees far too low before that, rejecting their consultant's proposal to triple the amount in 2008.

School officials acknowledge that, because they don't have the funds to add wings to overcrowded schools, they will probably need to end the "school choice" program — which allows parents in areas with lesser-quality schools to send their children to better schools — and perhaps buy more portables.

So our schools will suffer just so developers get an almost-free ride. How can that happen?

An examination of campaign contributions to School Board members provides the answer: Development interests generously fund their campaigns.

Jane Goodwin, the School Board member who made the motion for the 26 percent fee, got \$1,000 from residential developer Pat Neal and \$3,500 from Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee, among other development interests, in her 2014 election. Bridget Ziegler, who like Frank Kovach (who got 36 percent of his modest funding in 2012 from Neal, and much from developers previously) voted for a zero impact fee, also received \$1,000 from Neal, \$3,500 from Schroeder-Manatee and \$10,000 from other development interests. Caroline Zucker got thousands from development interests in 2012 and even more in 2008. And on and on.

At least Shirley Brown, who also got a lot of developer money, fought for a 65 percent or 50 percent impact fee. She deserves some credit for that, as does the school superintendent and staff, who sought a higher fee.

This problem is not unique to the School Board. Sarasota County commissioners, heavily bankrolled by developers, cut transportation impact fees 47.5 percent in much of the county despite a transportation funding shortfall of \$1.5 billion over 20 years. They also lowballed impact fees for administration buildings, courts and jails, leaving the county without the \$350 million needed to expand those facilities to serve growth, and looking to taxpayers to foot the bill.

Now that school impact fees are at least restored, they need to be increased to reasonable levels as soon as possible. That should be a big issue in School Board campaigns, next year and beyond.

The American people are sick and tired of their politicians being bought and sold. Candidates as disparate as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have risen in no small part because they tap into that reality. It's about time for local candidates to call out our local officials for being beholden to their patrons rather than to the public.

School Board members should serve the taxpayers and schoolchildren, not the developers who fund their campaigns. Our schools will continue to suffer if they do not.