

Solutions for Hillsborough's school crunch

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I couldn't agree more with the statement in your Dec. 5 editorial (*Study school deficit from all angles*) that Hillsborough County's \$196 school impact fee - the lowest in the state - guarantees that "school construction money will not keep pace with growth." You were right on target when you said that "every level of local government has a stake in providing adequate classroom space." However, the most important point was that the solution "must address larger issues, from tax fairness and attendance zones to growth management." I plan to read that statement aloud at the next meeting of the Task Force for School Capacity, Funding and the Planning of Growth on Dec. 12.

As the co-chair of the task force, I have a responsibility to help the group finalize a set of recommendations that are meaningful, balanced and fair. The School Board and County Commission have worked together on these issues for years, sharing the cost of an impact fee study last year. The commission - which has the sole authority to raise the school impact fee - has not yet acted on the recommendations, but we believe commissioners can and should act soon.

More recently, commissioners proposed that we form a task force of government officials, developers, parents and business people to work on solutions to the district's challenges regarding crowded schools. Commissioner Tom Scott and I agreed to act as co-chairs. Since its first meeting in early November, the task force has gotten an in-depth education on growth and school funding. Now it is time to propose solutions. On Monday I will call on my fellow task force members to:

Acknowledge that the school district's needs are real and that current funding sources are inadequate; Challenge the School Board to make the best use of existing capacity by continuing to redraw school boundaries. I and my fellow board members can't expect help from the County Commission or from taxpayers until we make more tough decisions that don't require new revenue;

Challenge the County Commission to raise the current school impact fee at least as high as the amount recommended in the impact fee study. No solution would be fair or complete without asking that new residents pay their way, and;

Acknowledge that an increased impact fee alone may not solve the problem, and spell out other funding alternatives that the School Board should consider as part of a balanced and fair approach. That includes seeking voter approval for a half-cent sales tax and seeking legislative changes to allow for an increase in local documentary stamps.

I have developed a deep respect for the members of the task force and I thank them for their service. If the group will take these steps, we will send a clear message that this community is serious about working together to do what's best for taxpayers and for schoolchildren.

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