

Questions about the hidden costs of building schools in Hillsborough

Transportation and safety issues are leading commissioners to think carefully about how to fund new schools



LOREN ELLIOTT | TimesLennard High School opened 10 years ago in Ruskin with 700 students. It is now "bursting at the seams" with 3,000, according to deputy superintendent Chris Farkas.

By [Marlene Sokol](#)

Published Yesterday

**Worth Knowing.
Worth Subscribing.**
99¢ for the first month

[Subscribe Now](#)

TAMPA - Getting the Hillsborough County government to raise the fees developers pay for new school construction might not be an easy sell. Or it might come with strings attached.

County Commissioners and the county administrator, at a workshop Tuesday to discuss impact fees, asked a lot of questions about why schools are built where they are, and as big as they are, putting county taxpayers on the hook for hidden costs including wear and tear on the roads.

The discussion followed [the commission's agreement last week to explore the cost of hiring crossing guards around middle schools, where traffic increased dramatically after the school district ended its practice of "courtesy busing" within two miles of some schools.](#)

At the time, County Administrator Mike Merrill said of the school district, "frankly, we've had a lot of discussions with them that have not been fruitful about their responsibility to help pay for traffic concerns around schools, so we end up paying for it."

On Tuesday, Merrill and the board members discussed whether some of the money generated by impact fees should be spent on improvements beyond the school property - sidewalks, for example, now that so many students have to walk.

Merrill said the district builds "big boxes in the middle of nowhere ... and you ship kids to them" when smaller schools, integrated into neighborhoods, might be easier for the county - and taxpayers - to accommodate.

Deputy Superintendent Chris Farkas, who was at the meeting to explain the district's funding issues and construction needs, pushed back at that statement.

"We don't put schools in the middle of a field and wait for you guys to build houses," he said. "It doesn't work that way. We actually do the opposite."

He used Lennard High School as an example. It opened 10 years ago in Ruskin with 700 students, he said. "Today we have over 3,000 students in that school. It's bursting at the seams."

[A study by the Tindale Oliver consulting firm says Hillsborough needs between 23 and 38 new schools, mostly in the southeast, over the next 15 years.](#) A new high school, costing three years worth of impact fees, is under construction in Riverview. Other high schools, including Alonzo and Sickles, have made do with additional classroom wings.

Merrill asked that the whole process should be looked at as part of the impact fee conversation. Perhaps, he said, Hillsborough should consider steps that have been taken in some communities - like building smaller campuses and holding their athletic events off-site on weekends.

"We're at a point where we've got affordable housing needs, we've got fire rescue needs," Merrill said. "I get the fact that we grow up in a culture and we expect things to be done in a certain way. It's a choice. So we can continue to build a football field for every school and we can continue to operate big schools the way we operate little schools, and you know what? We're going to have to raise taxes and we're going to have to raise impact fees."

He suggested a "total cost" approach to school planning.

"Maybe it's more costly to operate a smaller school" because of economies of scale, he said. "But when you look at the total cost on our side of the fence and the total cost of the whole enterprise, it may be cheaper to build smaller schools and change the way you operate them. You can save on the transportation end. There's just a whole host of ways to look at this, and we just haven't. And the question is, should we? Because if we don't, I'm here to tell you, our budget doesn't have that kind of room to pay for affordable housing, fire rescue, parks, storm water and school impacts. I'll be here telling you we need to raise taxes or cut service. So, you know, I can't make something out of nothing."

Farkas told Merrill, "we have no problem looking at other options. I think that we're open to that conversation. The more that we work together, the better off it is because we feel the same pain. There's only so much money out there."

Nothing was decided, and the process will take months. But most of the commissioners agreed to make the matter a high priority.

Staff writer Anastasia Dawson contributed to this report.



MARLENE SOKOL
Hillsborough Schools
Reporter

TRENDING NOW

Ads by Revcontent