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Bangor Area debates builder fees

Grucela says bill would let districts charge developers for schools.

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Of The Morning Call

At DeFranco Elementary School, children eat their lunches in the hallways. Bangor Area School Director Kevin Pruett used that image at a public forum Monday night to illustrate the ongoing problem of growth and overcrowding in the school district.

The district includes three townships — Washington, Upper Mount Bethel, and part of Lower Mount Bethel — facing substantial growth over the next few years. Between 100 and 200 homes are proposed for Washington, township Supervisor David Hess told the group. His counterpart from Upper Mount Bethel, Jerry Geake, said 700 new homes are proposed there.

But while the school and municipal officials at the forum agree that growth presents a problem, they say it's not a problem that's easy to solve.

In the center of the debate are something called impact fees, money that a school district or municipality could charge developers to cover the demands new homes place on the district. State Rep. Rich Grucela, D-Northampton, is pushing legislation that would allow Bangor and other school districts to impose impact fees.

Grucela — joining the meeting via speaker phone — said he hopes to introduce the bill in Harrisburg this week, although it's unlikely to happen. He described himself as "optimistic" about its future, but acknowledged it would be difficult to pass.

"I anticipate I will have opposition from the building lobby," he said.

In addition, Grucela said supporters of the bill from growing areas like Northampton and Monroe counties may have trouble persuading representatives of stagnant-size school districts to join them.

"Out here is a numbers game," he said. "We just don't have enough growing school districts statewide to put that kind of pressure on yet."

If the bill passed, school districts would not have to impose impact fees, but would have the option. Under Grucela's plan, developers could pay \$7,500 for each home in a development.

Developers also could receive rebates for certain work, such as building bus stops and making environmental or aesthetic improvements to homes.

School Director Robert Blake said the legislation should require school districts to use the money from the fees only to build schools, and not for something like a new maintenance building.

"I can picture some school district doing something silly and then the public getting mad," Blake said.

Northampton County Councilman Ron Angle, who lives in Upper Mount Bethel, said the district should buy all the land it will need for the next 100 years, rather than trying to preserve land. Unlike Grucela, he was pessimistic about the bill's future.

"The builders association isn't going to want to hear this," Angle said. "This will never get out of committee."

But others, such as School Directors Pamela Colton and Charlie Cole, said it's just a matter of strong lobbying on the part of the community.

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