

# The Gazette

## Falcon's growing discontent

By Brian Newsom

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Jane Deland watches with alarm as hundreds of homes creep toward her rural Falcon subdivision from northeast Colorado Springs.

When Falcon School District 49 asked her for a tax increase to relieve crowded schools, Deland protested the only way she knew how: She voted no.

“If they’re going to bring in truckloads of school-aged children, the developers need to pay for the schools. Period,” Deland said. “They are coming in, and they are raping and pillaging. That is how we feel.”

Developers, used to being vilified, say they are willing to consider helping to pay for schools — and a plan may be emerging in which they would do so.

They also say it’s unfair — and unrealistic — to ask new homeowners in their subdivisions to foot the entire bill for schools that benefit everyone.

In the age-old battle over growth, Falcon is left to fend for itself as it deals with more than 1,100 new students a year.

Rep. Michael Merrifield, D-Manitou Springs, has drafted a bill to allow local governments to require developers to pay school-impact fees.

School officials and developers, meanwhile, are considering a plan of their own, where developers would contribute millions of dollars in voluntary fees to ease the impact of all the new children living in their houses.

The district and developers hope that a binding pledge to meet voters partway will gain enough votes to raise more money to address crowding.

Developers have not decided how much they might pitch in — if they agree to contribute. In a letter to the school board after the election, Falcon developer Rusty Green said that as much as \$20 million could be raised to supplement taxpayer dollars. A district in decline won’t help sell houses.

With a significant contribution from developers, school officials could ask taxpayers for less money.

## **‘HEY, SHUT THE DOOR’**

Deland was not alone at the polls last November.

For the second time in two years, residents narrowly defeated a proposed tax measure. The most recent one would have raised as much as \$77 million for schools through an annual tax increase over three decades.

The defeat — by 214 votes — shocked school officials who were confident the crowding was severe enough to convince voters that the schools need more money.

Few people dispute the district has a problem.

Deland, a former high school English teacher, sympathizes. To raise taxes, though, is to encourage those who are causing the problem, she said.

“Our reaction is, ‘Hey, shut the door. Don’t let any more kids in,’” she said. “When the ship is sinking, why do you keep letting passengers on board?”

Students are attending class in 100 portable classrooms.

Some schools assign three students per locker.

At Horizon Middle School, 700 students shuffle through the cafeteria over six lunch shifts, the first at 10:15 a.m. and the last at 1:15 p.m.

Developers keep building. Home-building permits reached a county record in 2004.

Many of the 5,059 permits issued were for the northeast, the only part of Colorado Springs that’s in the Falcon School District and a key growth hub.

The area’s population nearly doubled from 1990 to 2000, jumping from 14,740 to 28,006.

Taxes would have gone up by as much as 25 percent under last year’s ballot question, making Falcon one of the highest-taxed school districts in the Pikes Peak region. The new schools would have been full by the time they opened.

Superintendent Ron Wynn understands taxpayers’ frustrations. But, he said, “The plug has already kind of been taken out of the dam.” The homes are coming, like it or not.

Board President Paul Bryant is excited about the prospect of a public/private venture.

Developers, he said, historically have gotten a free ride. He hopes the public will see this as a chance to ease its burden and still take care of the schools.

Mary Bernard, like Deland, is cool to the new homes and also voted no in November. She is a neighbor of Deland and has watched for 12 years as the area transformed from pastures to rooftops.

“When you’re talking about ruining the land around us to please a developer,” she said, “you’re ruining our way of life.”

If developers put up enough money, though, she said she would take a tax question more seriously.

## **WAKE-UP CALL FOR DEVELOPERS**

Merrifield said his bill would remove schools from this no-man’s land.

His proposal would give local governments the authority to collect impact fees from developers for schools that have a certain growth rate and limited bonding capacity.

A similar bill last year never made it to a legislative committee, he said. With Democrats now controlling the House and Senate, and Merrifield chairing the Senate Education Committee, he thinks that might change.

Politics aside, Falcon’s crowded schools have developers talking about what they can do, Green said. He is developing Woodmen Hills, a 2,600-home subdivision in the Falcon area.

Prices may drop and houses may stay on the market longer if the district’s reputation declines because of crowding.

Developers and related businesses raised more than \$100,000 for the school district’s campaign last fall. Billboards, signs and flyers popped up across the area.

The tax measure’s failure was a wake-up call, Green said. He said many developers have expressed interest but no commitments have been made.

Already, Woodmen Hills has pitched in more than \$1 million to help build Meridian and Woodmen Hills elementary schools.

Green doesn’t expect proposed contributions to change developers’ reputations or the feelings of people like Deland.

“It’s the American way to despise big business,” Green said.

People pay little attention to the road improvements, rising home values, retail, and utilities that developers often bring to an area, he said, but they are quick to point out how growth harms their way of life.

Don Magill, developer of the 3,500-home Springs Ranch area, said he's donated several hundred thousand dollars to Falcon for items such as athletic field stands.

"You tell that to the public, and they'll say you should've done that anyway, and you should've done it sooner."

Deland thinks developers should pay for new schools.

Green said that's not going to happen because raising home prices to cover the costs for new schools would halt sales.

Developers said another tax measure defeat would hurt them and slow growth. They are worried.

For the school district, which is cutting programs and considering options like yearround school to alleviate the crowding, money from anyone is welcome.

"The one that ends up being the real loser is the kids," Wynn said. "I think it's all of our problem. . . . It's a total community problem."

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