



St. Lucie County

Legislative Update

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Our Mission...

To provide service, infrastructure and leadership necessary to advance a safe and sustainable community, maintain a high quality of life, and protect the natural environment for all our citizens.

HOUSE LOOKS TO CLAMP DOWN ON LOCAL TAXES

A wide-ranging bill that would rein in local governments' ability to increase taxes narrowly passed the House Ways & Means Committee Wednesday.

The committee approved the measure (PCB WMC 17-02) on a nearly party-line vote, 9-7, with Rep. Kathleen Peters, R-Treasure Island, joining all the committee Democrats in opposing the measure.

The proposal would also restrict cities and counties from passing local option taxes if they have approved property-tax increases within the last three years. An increase in sales taxes for school construction would have to pass a school board with a four-fifths supermajority.

And the measure would require any local referendums raising taxes to gain 60 percent of the vote to pass. Such questions also would have to go before voters during general elections. Voters would also have to approve any moves by local governments to take on debt longer than five years.

Critics contended the legislation was confusing and too restrictive on local governments.

Amber Hughes, representing Florida League of Cities, said different accounting methods among local governments might make it difficult to figure out the meaning of certain terms in the bill -- like the excess fund balances that the legislation targets.

The bill comes amid a debate at the Capitol about the proper role of local governments. A measure that would severely restrict the authority of local governments to pass business regulations (HB 17) has already been approved by one of its two House committees.

PROPERTY TAX RESTRICTION READY FOR HOUSE FLOOR

Legislation that would permanently prevent radical increases in property taxes was approved by the House Commerce Committee 24-2 Thursday and is on its way to the full House.

HJR 21, sponsored by Rep. Colleen Burton, R-Lakeland, proposes a constitutional amendment that caps annual property tax increases on nonhomestead property at 10 percent.

The Senate companion (SJR 76) needs to pass two more committees before it is ready to be heard by the full upper chamber.

Watch Session Live:**Connect with
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**HOUSE COMPROMISES ON PUBLIC RECORDS LAW SUITS**

Compromise legislation (HB 163) between the Florida League of Cities and the First Amendment Foundation on public records lawsuits passed its first House committee Wednesday.

The bill says courts may not award attorney fees if it finds that public records requests were made primarily to harass the state and local government entities. The court must award fees if it finds the agency "unlawfully" refused access to public records.

Having passed the House Oversight, Transparency & Administration Subcommittee, the bill has two more committees of reference.

A similar bill (SB 246) was again filed by Sen. Rene Garcia, R-Hialeah, in the Senate. But Sen. Dennis Baxley, the chair of its first committee of reference, has no plans to give it a hearing.

Instead, the Senate is pushing SB 80 by Sen. Greg Steube, giving judges discretion to award attorney fees. Despite recently being amended, that bill still faces staunch opposition.

LEGISLATION PROPOSES ALLOWING FPL TO CHARGE CUSTOMERS FOR INVESTMENTS

After losing a major battle in court last year, Florida Power & Light is now turning to the Florida Legislature to change the state law and give it the authority to charge customers, and profit off, speculative natural gas fracking.

The bill, HB 1043 by Rep. Jason Brodeur, R-Sanford, is titled "Prudent Utility Investments in Natural Gas Reserves," and the Senate companion is SB 1248 by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina Beach.

"Natural gas is a proven commodity that brings rates down and so we are going to allow FPL to go forward with a proven technology to have these reserves so that we pay down the road," Bean said in an interview.

The bill would essentially overturn a Florida Supreme Court ruling last year that said that Florida regulators exceeded their authority when they allowed FPL to become the first utility in the nation to be allowed to charge its customers, not its shareholders, for its speculative investment in fracking operations.

WATER LEGISLATION FOR NORTH AND SOUTH FLORIDA

A Senate plan (SB 10) to bond \$1.2 billion in state funds to build a water storage reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee grew to a \$3.3 billion bonding program that would incorporate dozens of water projects around the state, incentives for job development, and other provisions under an adopted amendment Wednesday.

The changes were an attempt by the Senate sponsor, Sen. Rob Bradley, R-Fleming Island, to win wider approval for Senate President Joe Negron's top priority plan to prevent discharges of polluted water from the lake into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries that led to toxic algae blooms, and a state of emergency.

The committee also agreed to Bradley's SB 234 that would earmark millions from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund for St. Johns River Water Management District projects. Sen. Linda Stewart, D-Orlando, successfully changed the annual amount from \$35 million to \$45 million before it was passed.

Both SB 10 and SB 234 still have to pass the Senate Appropriations Committee before they head to the floor.

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FLORIDA BEACH RENOURISHMENT OVERHAUL

Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, Friday outlined comprehensive legislation that would overhaul the way Florida manages its eroding shores.

Latvala's proposed legislation comes after The Naples Daily News published a four-day "Shrinking Shores" series outlining failures in Florida's beach management program. It also appears to align with Gov. Rick Scott's budget plan for beaches.

With his 22-page bill (SB 1590), Latvala is advocating what would be the biggest overhaul of the state's beach management system in nearly 20 years.

Among the highlights, the plan would:

- Set a \$50 million minimum annual state funding commitment -- or 7.6 percent of the state's Land Acquisition Trust Fund, whichever is less -- for beach renourishment and inlet management projects; that would be \$20 million more than the previous minimum of \$30 million set in 1998;
- Require the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to establish a three-year work plan, identifying prioritized projects to be funded each year;
- Revamp the way the DEP ranks beach and inlet projects proposed by local communities, setting up a four-tier system for scoring projects and for the first time prioritizing beach projects based on their expected return on investment and economic impact;
- Refocus the state's efforts on managing the movement of sand around Florida's ports and inlets, which are primary drivers of erosion, particularly on the East Coast.

Latvala was joined Friday by other state and local leaders, including Rep. Kathleen Peters, R-South Pasadena, who is sponsoring a companion bill (HB 1213) in the House. Her bill does not include the \$50 million funding minimum.

HOUSE WORKER'S COMP DRAWS OBJECTIONS

Business and health-care groups raised objections Tuesday to a draft House workers' compensation insurance bill that addresses issues such as attorney fees and payments for treating injured workers.

The House Insurance & Banking Subcommittee held a workshop on the proposal, as lawmakers grapple with making changes to the workers' compensation system after two Florida Supreme Court rulings last year and a 14.5 percent insurance rate increase.

The draft bill, in part, would allow judges of compensation claims to award attorney fees up to \$250 an hour. It also includes proposals such as tying reimbursements for outpatient care at hospitals and ambulatory-surgical centers to a Medicare fee system, according to a House summary.

Business groups focused during the workshop on the attorney fee proposal, arguing that litigation costs drive up workers' compensation insurance rates. But subcommittee chairman Danny Burgess, a Zephyrhills Republican who is an attorney, pointed during the workshop to the need to follow case law in dealing with the attorney fee issue.

Meanwhile, officials with hospitals and ambulatory-surgical centers said the Medicare-related reimbursement proposal would reduce the amounts they get paid to care for workers' compensation patients.

Also taking part in the discussion were representatives of labor unions and plaintiffs' attorneys, who have long argued that the workers' compensation system is tilted toward holding down costs for businesses to the detriment of injured people.

