

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.

Supermajority requirement for tax increases headed to House floor

A joint resolution to require two-thirds of the Legislature to agree to increase or create new taxes or fees is headed for the House floor.

House Joint Resolution 7001 passed the House Appropriations Committee on a 20-8 vote Tuesday, its final stop before being heard by the entire chamber.

A comparable resolution, Senate Joint Resolution 1742, was filed in the Senate. It would require approval by three-fifths of both chambers.

Interior secretary says new drilling 'off the table' for Florida

After meeting with Gov. Rick Scott on Tuesday in Tallahassee, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said he was withdrawing Florida from consideration for new oil and gas drilling leases. Zinke had created a political uproar in Florida last week when he announced his department was proposing opening waters off the Atlantic Coast and Florida Keys to new drilling leases as part of a five-year plan.

The eastern Gulf of Mexico would have been opened to drilling after a moratorium expires in 2022. Scott said he opposed the plan and requested a meeting with Zinke to ask that Florida be removed from consideration. In making the announcement Tuesday with Scott at the Tallahassee airport, Zinke said seismic testing still would be allowed but there would be no new oil drilling or platforms.

Water district issues status report with alternatives for Everglades reservoir

State water managers on Tuesday issued a progress report to the Legislature identifying alternatives for an Everglades water storage reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee. Senate Bill 10 authorized bonding to pay the state's half of a \$1.6 billion water storage reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

The initial proposal to buy 50,000 acres of farmland faced stiff opposition from farmers and the sugar industry until it was scaled back to focus on 31,000 of existing state land. Senate President Joe Negron (R-Stuart) in December raised concerns that alternatives discussed by the South Florida Water Management District were "constrained." Some environmentalists said the reservoir designs were too small and too deep, eliminating aquatic habitat and requiring extensive water treatment systems.

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House panel approves bill for infrastructure projects to be funded with tourist cash

A fight over tourist development cash that's driven, in part, by a local political fight on the move in the House, a chamber skeptical of using those funds for tourism marketing. The bill, House Bill 585, sponsored by Rep. Randy Fine (R-Palm Bay), would allow Tourist Development Taxes to be spent on major infrastructure projects tied to tourism. Anytime the Legislature — usually the House — pushes a plan that can divert tourist development taxes from direct tourism marketing, it gets push back from that industry.

Richard Turner, general counsel for the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association, said that if the bill does pass, lawmakers should consider requiring a two-thirds vote from county commissions in order to approve using tourism dollars on construction projects and provide a sunset provision of five years.

The bill passed with a 9 to 4 vote and will be heard possibly next week in the House Ways and Means Committee.

Conservation funding bill amended to exclude agency overhead

A Senate bill that would provide \$100 million annually for land conservation passed its final committee stop on Thursday with an amendment.

According to the sponsor, Senator Rob Bradley (R-Fleming Island), Senate Bill 370 is needed to fulfill voter approval in 2014 of the water and land conservation spending measure called Amendment 1. The bill was amended on Thursday to prohibit the Legislature from using the Land Acquisition Trust Fund to pay for state agency overhead and support services.

Among the groups supporting the Senate bill on Thursday were Audubon Florida, Florida Conservation Voters, Defenders of Wildlife and the Florida Association of Counties.

The bill now heads to the Senate floor. A House companion bill, House Bill 1353, was filed on Tuesday.

Resign-to-run bill ready for Senate floor

The full Senate is set to consider legislation that would reinstate Florida's resign-to-run law after a quick committee vote today. The legislation, sponsored by state Sen. Travis Hutson (R-Palm Coast), would require state or local elected officials to resign their current office before running for a federal office.

Florida's previous law was tossed out in 2008 when then-Republican Gov. Charlie Crist was being considered as vice presidential candidate for GOP presidential nominee John McCain. The Republican-led Legislature changed the law when he was being considered for the ticket.

Staff analysts from the Senate Rules Committee, which passed the bill on a 9-1 vote, said it will also likely dissuade state and local elected leaders from leaving their post to run for higher office, which would reduce state costs for special elections and impact the political consulting industry.

Hutson's bill now heads to the Senate floor for a full vote.

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**ST. LUCIE
COUNTY**
FLORIDA



**St. Lucie County
Board of County
Commissioners**

Mailing Address

2300 Virginia Avenue
Fort Pierce, FL 34982

Phone

(772) 462-1100

TDD

(772) 462-1428

FAX

(772) 462-2131

E-mail

fogartyn@stlucieco.org

Website

www.StLucieCo.gov

Opioid legislation starts to move

The Health Quality Subcommittee approved HB 21, by Rep. Jim Boyd, R-Bradenton, aimed at combatting the opioid crisis.

Last year, he aimed to address the crisis with a bill that increased the minimum mandatory sentence for drug traffickers.

In addition to a three-day limit on initial opioid prescriptions for patients with acute pain, unless they meet “strict conditions” for a seven-day supply, the bill would require all health care professionals that prescribe medication to participate in the Florida Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a statewide database that monitors controlled substance prescriptions. The legislator said the bill would not affect patients that receive opioid drugs to deal with chronic pain.

It would also allow the Department of Health to share that information with other states.

A similar bill (SB 8) in the Senate faced resistance from medical providers who worry the bill places unreasonable restrictions on pain management efforts. The Senate Health Policy Committee initially was scheduled to vote on the legislation Wednesday, but the bill’s sponsor, Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, delayed the vote to work on some amendments.

Local government meeting notice change passes final Senate panel

The Senate Rules Committee passed a bill Senate Bill 192 to clarify local officials can socialize outside of publicly noticed meetings, sending it to the chamber floor.

No notice is required when two or more members of a board gather if no official acts are taken and no public business is discussed.

The bill also says members of a board may participate in “fact-finding” exercises or excursions to research public business if a public record is kept and if votes are not taken or public business is not discussed.

Local government foreign travel ban approved

The Local & Federal Affairs Subcommittee approved House Bill 815, by Rep. Bryan Avila (R-Hialeah), which will require out of state travel by local government elected officials to be approved by the governing board at a publicly noticed meeting, and will prohibit international travel.

Furthermore, the local government elected official will have to report all travel expenses that are reimbursed from taxpayer funds to the commission on ethics for the applicable local government or to the state Commission on Ethics, if no local ethics commission exists.

However, constitutional officers are exempt from these changes.

In addition, the legislation will require municipal elected officials and candidates to file a full and public disclosure of their financial interests, also known as Form 6.

A similar bill, Senate Bill 1180 sponsored by Senator Greg Steube, is currently in the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee and is yet to be heard.

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