

Legislative UPDATE

In This Issue...

Budget Floor Debate	1
Drug importation plan	1
Tanning lotion/tourism	2
School security bill	2
AirBnB Bill	3
Amendment 4	3

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.

Florida House and Senate budgets fast tracked for floor debate next week

The House and Senate could vote as soon as next week on their chamber's proposed fiscal year 2020 spending plans after appropriations committees last Wednesday overwhelmingly approved them.

The House Appropriations Committee green-lighted its proposed 420-page General Appropriations Act, which will eventually be adopted as House Bill 5001, while the 424-page, nearly 150-time amended Senate Bill 2500 was cleared by the Senate Appropriations Committee in a 21-0 vote.

By fast-tracking the budgets before debating their parts, chambers are positioning their priorities to best survive the quibbles to come as lawmakers compete in committees to fund favored priorities within spending guidelines established by the omnibus budget packages.

The House's proposed plan is \$89.9 billion. The Senate is seeking \$90.3 billion, about \$400 million, or a half-percent, more.

Both are higher than the \$88.7 billion budget for the current fiscal year but less than the \$91.3 billion Gov. Ron DeSantis is seeking in his budget request for fiscal year 2020, which begins July 1.

Ultimately, all three will converge in House-Senate conference committees convened to iron out differences. Lawmakers have until midnight May 3, when the session concludes.

Final House panel OKs drug importation plan

A drug-importation plan backed by Gov. Ron DeSantis was approved by its final House panel today and will head to the full chamber floor for a hearing and final passage.

The measure, House Bill 19, would establish a program to import drugs from Canada in an effort to lower costs for Medicaid, county health programs and the state prison system. The measure passed the Health and Human Services Committee with opposition from some Democrats, including ranking member Nicholas Duran (D-Miami), who voted against it.

A related Senate bill, SB1528, has two committees to go before it will be heard by the full chamber. That measure, in contrast to the House bill, would allow any eligible pharmacy or pharmacist to import drugs from Canada. Its next stop is the Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services.

Both House and Senate proposals would require federal approval before they could be enacted in Florida.

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Hutson seeks to undo link between tanning lotion and tourism dollars

State Sen. Travis Hutson (R-St. Augustine) has proposed a budget amendment to remove language that would prohibit Visit Florida, the state tourism marketing program, from spending money to promote localities that ban the use of certain sunscreens. His amendment also would eliminate a \$1 million provision requiring Visit Florida to conduct an advertising campaign to raise tourists' awareness about the environmental harm caused by litter from plastic and foam containers.

The original budget language drew criticism from some environmentalists, who also are opposing Senate Bill 588, a separate Hutson bill that would prohibit the local regulation of sunscreen and preempt local bans on drink straws until 2024 while an environmental study is conducted.

Key West in February voted to ban sunscreens containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, chemicals that have been shown to damage coral reefs.

School security bill wins second Senate vote

A second Senate panel today advanced a controversial school security bill to allow teachers to carry guns in classrooms.

The legislation, Senate Bill 7030, cleared the Senate Infrastructure and Security Committee on a 5-3 vote along party lines, with Democrats in opposition.

The bill, filed by the Senate Committee on Education, was approved with an amendment from Sen. Tom Lee (R-Thonotosassa), chairman of the infrastructure committee. Lee's amendment would make it illegal to impersonate a school guardian, similar to laws that make impersonating a police officer illegal.

The measure's expansion of the Aaron Feis School Guardian Program is vehemently opposed by Democrats and teacher groups, including the Florida Education Association. Dozens of speakers argued against the proposal.

The legislation also builds on a school safety bill lawmakers adopted last year in response to the fatal shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. It would give school boards the power to establish guardian programs without approval from local sheriffs. It also would arm the state commissioner of education with more power to punish school districts that don't comply with safety requirements. The measure would dramatically change how the state distributes funds for Safe Schools, the largest pocket of school security money. Schools would receive two-thirds of their funding based on enrollment and one-third based on crime rates. Currently, that formula is reversed.

A similar bill, House Bill 7093, advanced in the House Education Committee last week. Both the House and Senate bills have one more planned committee stop at their respective appropriations committees.

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Fine seeks to write Airbnb out of regulatory relief bill

A House bill that would subject vacation rentals to statewide regulation and preempt local ordinances passed its first committee today. The measure included a sanction against Airbnb.

House Bill 987 by state Rep. Jamie Grant (R-Tampa) passed the House Business and Professions Subcommittee on a 10-5 vote. The measure would make the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation responsible for licensing, inspections and occupancy limits and forbid local zoning ordinances that apply only to vacation rentals.

The bill includes a provision from state Rep. Randy Fine (R-Palm Bay) that would exempt Airbnb from the preemption, a move that would force the online rental company to comply with hundreds of local rules and regulations. Fine's amendment was in response to the company's prohibition on listings in the West Bank, a decision he compared to German Nazis who decreed his family could no longer own property because they were Jewish.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Florida Cabinet voted in January to place Airbnb on a list of companies prohibited from doing business with the state. DeSantis called for the sanctions after the state received a report in November from the Zachor Legal Institute. That report concluded Airbnb's decision to pull 200 listings from the West Bank was meant to support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement.

Senate advances Amendment 4 bill

A state Senate Criminal Justice Committee bill to implement a constitutional amendment restoring voting rights to former felons advanced by a 3-2 vote along party lines today. The measure, Senate Proposed Bill 7086, would clarify what constitutes a murder and a sexual offense under Amendment 4, which voters approved in November. It outlines conditions an offender must meet before terms of his or her sentence can be considered complete and voting rights restored.

Opponents of the bill are concerned with language that would require all restitution, fines and fees to be paid before a past felon can be eligible to vote. An amendment passed in committee today would allow fines and fees converted to civil liens to meet eligibility requirements. Restitution would still be required to be paid in full.

The Senate bill, unlike the House version, would include attempted murderers on the list of offenders not qualified to have their voting rights restored.

A House version of the bill advanced in committee last week. The Senate version will be reassigned to subsequent committees.

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