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Gaetz calls bill opponents an "embarrassment" and says their lobbyist should be fired

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Law enforcement officers, public defenders and other supporters of Florida's 28 pretrial programs who packed the room for the **House Judiciary Committee** meeting got an earful from **Rep. Matt Gaetz**, R-Shalimar, on Thursday.

The dressing-down came just after the committee passed **HB 1379** by **Rep. Chris Dorworth**, R-Heathrow, which deals with pretrial release programs. The programs, currently running in 28 Florida counties, provide supervision for arrested defendants who are released from jail while they're awaiting trial.

Dorworth's bill would limit access to court pretrial release programs to indigent defendants who qualify for public defenders, and would make ineligible any defendant who had ever failed to show up for a court date. He introduced amendments Thursday that would bring the bill in line with one by **Sen. Elyn Bogdanoff**, R-Ft. Lauderdale, who resurrected the issue in the Senate last week by tagging a pretrial amendment onto an otherwise noncontroversial courts bill.

On Thursday, Dorworth also filed an amendment -- adopted without objection -- that would exempt counties with fewer than 350,000 inhabitants from the new restrictions. Thursday's meeting just happened to be packed with people who came to argue against the bill, including several law enforcement officials, public defenders and pretrial program providers from Okaloosa County, who would be exempt under the last-minute amendment, should the controversial bill be signed into law.

Kelly Huckabee, with **Okaloosa County Pretrial Programs**, was just one of several people from the area who traveled to Tallahassee and stood up to tell legislators the programs save the state "a tremendous amount of money," since it's estimated to cost approximately \$5-7 a day to keep a defendant in a pretrial program, versus upwards of \$130 to keep that same defendant in a jail cell. They also provide supervision, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and assistance to victims of domestic violence that defendants don't get when they pay a bail bondsman to get them out of jail, she said.

Lawmakers heard over an hour of testimony -- almost unanimously in opposition to the bill, save for one South Florida bail bondsman -- but ultimately voted 10-8 vote to approve the measure, just after Gaetz called out the speakers from Okaloosa County for their opposition.

"My reaction to the content of that testimony is one of pure embarrassment. The bill would exempt Okaloosa County ... I certainly hope that the county that I represent didn't send anyone here and aren't paying for anyone's reimbursements to be here and to give testimony that was totally not germane to the matter before us," Gaetz said. "If there were lobbyists who told folks to be here, they ought to be fired. This was an example of snatching defeat from the claws of victory. It's utter incompetence."

Gaetz excoriated those from Panhandle counties "who always want to talk about how unique we are, yet we fail to realize that there are significant problems in other parts of the state that this bill addresses." He said that once the bill reaches the house floor, he was considering introducing an amendment that would remove the exemption for smaller counties.