



Pinellas County sets lobbying priorities, beach nourishment among them

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Beach nourishment money? More of it.

A loophole in online travel taxes? Close it.

Limit pretrial release from jail? Split on it.

The Florida legislative session will begin in January, earlier than normal because of redistricting. That prompted Pinellas County officials to meet recently to determine their lobbying priorities for the 2012 session. The county's legislative delegation is scheduled to meet Sept. 14 to hear concerns from Pinellas officials and others.

Key Pinellas concerns include:

Planning agencies: Last spring, politics killed the chances of an otherwise noncontroversial plan to combine the Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Pinellas Planning Council. One of the Democrats' louder critics of Republican leadership, state Rep. Rick Kriseman of St. Petersburg, was a sponsor last session.

Kriseman isn't carrying the bill this year. The county instead enlisted Republican state Reps. Jim Frishe, the majority whip, and Ed Hooper, along with Sen. Jack Latvala.

"We tried to up the ante and get some strong support this year to push this through," said Carl Harness, an assistant county administrator in charge of lobbying.

The change was news to Kriseman, who said GOP leaders insisted to him that partisanship wasn't at play last year. It was, they said, just a lot of local bills dying.

Kriseman and lawmakers received an e-mail asking for their bills Thursday. Kriseman inquired about whether he should sponsor the bill again, but the county and three Republicans had already agreed on the merger bill two days earlier.

"We were going to file it again," Kriseman said. "That would have been nice if they had let me know. Quite frankly, I want the bill to pass."

Pretrial release: The bail bonds industry won a subtle victory during last week's meeting.

The county had opposed bills last spring that would have restricted the number of people eligible for release from jail without bond. Bail bonds lobbyists pressed hard for the bills, which sought to limit the pool to poor people.

Sheriff Jim Coats said the effect would cost taxpayers \$5 million to staff and operate extra jail space, because fewer people would be released.

"Obviously that kind of goes against the point of the bail bondsmen and folks being able to pay their way," Harness said.

Commissioners Neil Brickfield, Nancy Bostock and Norm Roche objected, leading to a 3-3 vote that muted the county's voice against any legislation for the upcoming session. Karen Seel was absent.

"This is a case of the government competing directly against bail bondsmen," said Brickfield, who did public relations work for bail bonds companies before being elected in 2008.

Honeymoon Island: What do you need to keep the No. 1-attended state park a jewel on the gulf? Pinellas' answer is more sand.

The county wants \$5.6 million for beach erosion control there. The project needs to be added to the state's priority list. The county would be required to match 25 percent of the cost.

Tourist taxes: Pinellas officials and other counties say they have lost tens of millions of dollars in taxes from online travel companies. The companies pay taxes on the bulk rate they pay for hotel rooms, not the retail rate they sell rooms for.

In Pinellas, online travel companies avoid paying \$1.4 million annually, county officials estimate. Failed legislation last year sought to exempt the companies from paying the higher rate. The fight is expected to return in the 2012 session.

"We're seeking to get the elevated amounts that we think are due and owed. ... The legislation undercuts that," said County Attorney Jim Bennett.

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