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In pretrial debate, listen to sheriffs

It is ever more apparent that the Florida Legislature's priority is not easing taxpayers' burden but serving special interests.

Consider the Legislature's irrational attempt to enrich the bail bond industry at taxpayers' expense.

The legislation would limit pretrial release programs to the indigent, and curtail programs that have proved highly effective at reducing jail populations while deterring crime. The sole purpose of this effort is to help bail agents get more businesses.

Sponsor Rep. Chris Dorworth, a Lake Mary Republican, admits as much. "It's 100 percent about money; there's no doubt about that," he told the Tribune's Elaine Silvestrini. "When you have government competing against private industry, it creates an unfair advantage." But it should be about public money and public safety. And many of Florida's sheriffs, including Hillsborough's David Gee, have found pretrial release to be an economical way to control prisoners while easing jailhouse crowding.

With pretrial release, counties can release defendants without bail if they fulfill requirements such as attending drug-treatment or mental-health classes. They must undergo drug and alcohol testing. The defendants are responsible for paying most of the costs.

And consider the benefit to the public: Jail costs upward of \$85 a day, while monitoring defendants with an ankle bracelet costs about \$8 a day.

But the bail bond industry doesn't profit from these defendants, so Dorworth and his cronies want to stack the deck so that only indigent defendants — who could ill afford to pay for pretrial release costs — are eligible for those programs.

Under the legislation, unless simply released, defendants would either have to post their own bonds, use a bail bondsman or remain in jail at taxpayers' expense. And bond agents do not rigorously supervise released defendants as the prerelease programs do.

The result: more business for the bail industry, more inmates in jail for taxpayers to support and probably more crime.

Hillsborough Sheriff's Col. Jim Previterra, who oversees the jails, estimates the change would cost the county more than \$200,000 a year. But more importantly, it would diminish prerelease controls that have proved their effectiveness.

Supporters of the move point to Pasco, which eliminated its pretrial release program to cut costs. But its jail population increased by 9 percent. And Pasco saw an increase of nearly 15 percent in the number of defendants being released without supervision. The move *might* prove economical,

but over time it could easily prove damaging to taxpayers and public safety.

Most small counties, of course, don't need pretrial release. It is an urban county issue.

In counties such as Hillsborough, pretrial release is working, helping reduce crime and cut costs. If Pasco's plan proves effective, other counties will try it. There is no reason for lawmakers to interfere. Each county should be able to decide which strategy meets its needs.

But characteristic of this know-it-all Legislature, lawmakers are treating with disdain the sheriffs who best understand their community's crime problems.

Listen to Dorworth: "They're protecting the bottom line, the revenues that come out of the programs they want there. â; I would suggest that as government we need to constrain ourselves to the purpose that we are here to do. There is a private industry that can do this."

There is also a professional law-enforcement agency that can do this ââ and whose priority is the public safety, not profits. Thoughtful pretrial release programs have helped Sheriff Gee and other sheriffs reduce jail overcrowding ââ even while cutting budgets and staff.

Dorworth, in any event, has nerve lecturing anyone on fiscal responsibility. The 34-year-old has had to fight foreclosure on an 8,200-square-foot mansion.

He and the others steering this bail bond industry bill won't have to worry if it results in crammed cells and more criminals on the loose. The sheriffs will. Lawmakers should listen to them and abandon this unnecessary legislation.