



State lawmakers' proposals rub some local officials the wrong way

[Tom McLaughlin, Florida Freedom Newspapers](#)

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Matt Gaetz said it was never his intention as a state representative to win the Florida Association of Counties' award for legislator of the year.

That's probably a good thing.

His chances likely were on thin ice after a public dressing down of Okaloosa County Commissioner Dave Parisot at a House Judiciary Committee meeting.

And they were certainly lost when he introduced an amendment to a House bill to make Tourist Development Council directors an elected post.

Wayne Harris, another Okaloosa County commissioner, called Gaetz's TDC director proposal "the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

This year the county's state lawmakers appeared unusually adept at introducing legislation that ticked off their local government counterparts.

Not to be outdone by his son, state Sen. Don Gaetz sponsored a bill that would have eliminated the Mid-Bay Bridge Authority and two expressway authorities.

The senior Gaetz said he could have gotten the legislation passed — and saved taxpayers about \$25 million a year — but the response from local governments, the Destin Area Chamber of Commerce and the county's Economic Development Council made the effort seem silly.

"There's a point at where you've got to decide not to fight to give people what they don't want," Don Gaetz said.

The locals felt Sen. Gaetz's bill would place control of bridge operations in the hands of a state bureaucracy.

After the County Commission denounced the proposal, Chairman James Campbell took the cause of local government sovereignty to Gov. Rick Scott.

After dining with Scott when he visited the area recently, Campbell said he had broached the idea of finding a way to make legislators inform local officials about plans to introduce bills that would affect them.

The younger Gaetz's videotaped statements to members of a county delegation that traveled to Tallahassee to lobby for pre-trial release programs affected some locals more personally than politically.

"I was disappointed in that little tongue-lashing or whatever you want to call it, coming from one of our own representatives," said Larry Caskey, the county's corrections director.

"I wasn't happy with that display," he said. "It's politics, I guess."

Paul Lawson, Caskey's assistant administrator, was with Commissioner Parisot at the Judiciary Committee

hearing and spoke in support of pre-trial services, which Caskey said have been “a tremendous success in helping us manage our jail population.”

Rep. Gaetz, who had worked out a compromise that would have exempted Okaloosa County from having its pre-trial services cut from the state budget, called the presence of county representatives at the committee meeting “utter incompetence.”

On Wednesday, Gaetz defended his choice of words, particularly targeting Parisot.

“This is an example of a member of the Okaloosa County Commission putting the interests of the Florida Association of Counties above the interests of Okaloosa County,” said Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach.

He said no one from the county contacted him before the committee meeting.

“It is very hard with the small Northwest Florida delegation to get concessions from other parts of the state. I did a lot of heavy lifting, and to have Okaloosa County show up and trash a bill without consulting me was incredibly embarrassing to me and could have undermined my efforts,” he said.

Parisot did not return a phone call Wednesday seeking comment.

Rep. Gaetz’s second stumble in the eyes of some local officials came when he introduced the amendment to elect TDC directors.

While Harris was openly critical, county TDC Director Mark Bellinger said when the amendment was made public that he was “confused” by its timing.

Bellinger did not respond this week to emailed questions about Gaetz’s amendment.

Gaetz said he spoke to Bellinger at a public event Wednesday and that Bellinger “praised me publicly” for his legislative work. According to Gaetz, little was said about the amendment, which was introduced and then quickly rescinded.

Dawn Moliterno, Walton County’s TDC director, said she was “certainly not angry” about Gaetz’s proposal.

“I’ve not had a chance to speak to Matt to ask him about his thought process, why he proposed that,” she said.

Rep. Gaetz said it is not a state legislator’s job to “walk lock step with local government.”

“I don’t represent local government. I represent the taxpayer,” he said.

Okaloosa County Administrator Jim Curry said that while local and state governments won’t agree on some things, he believes better communication could improve relations.

“Government on all levels just needs to communicate better,” he said. “We’re all working to serve the public. It’s a two-way street.”

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