

Saunders: Whose bad idea was this?

BY BARRY SAUNDERS - Staff Writer

PUBLISHED IN: SAUNDERS

For some people, \$150 is two tanks of gas or a week's worth of groceries or even a night out on the town in New York with Sweet Thang - provided one of you doesn't eat, drink or breathe.

For others, though, that amount could mean the difference between freedom and the opposite of freedom.

That's why everyone should rejoice that the state House withdrew a despicable piece of legislation. Senate Bill 756 sought to do away with pretrial release programs and eliminate unsecured appearance bonds. It wanted to require that anyone arrested for even the most innocuous offense would have bail set at \$1,000. If you pay cash, you'd have to plunk down \$150 - or 15 percent.

Say some poor schmo gets arrested for something like public intoxication or playing his car stereo too loud. If he can't come up with the \$150, he can't get to work and will likely lose his job. That, in turn, will cost him his already tenuous standing as a member of the working poor and send his life on a downward spiral. All for \$150.

Chances are, the next time he's standing before a judge, it won't be for singing "Sweet Adeline" too loudly or pumping up the decibels on his car stereo. With an unsecured bond, however, the judge would see that the defendant posed no danger and would let him out until his court date.

Senate Bill 756 was introduced by Sen. Debbie Clary, passed in the Senate and might have made it through the House had not Judge Kristin Ruth raised a ruckus.

"It was a self-serving bill by bail bondsmen, but it died, thank goodness," Judge Ruth told me this week. "I spoke in opposition to it on behalf of district court judges."

State Sen. Tom Apodaca and Rep. Justin Burr are two members of the legislature involved in the bail bonds business, although Apodaca lists his occupation as "entrepreneur." As someone who has had to avail himself of bail bondsmen services a time or five, I can attest that it is an honorable profession, so be proud, senator.

Apodaca abstained from voting on 756 in the Senate, although he and Burr were lauded by the bail industry's newsletter, AIA. An article stated, "With Senator Apodaca actively supporting Burr's candidacy and having been raised in a family bail business dating back to 1952, Burr recognizes his

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unique chance to promote the betterment of commercial bail."

And how.

Just like a bad penny - back when we could afford to throw one away - this bill that would be a boon to bail bondsmen will reappear. "I'm very, very thankful it died," Ruth said, "but I'm sure it will pop back up."

It won't, however, be reintroduced by Clary. She is leaving office in November. To become a lobbyist.

Calls to her office to find out why she introduced the bill to end pretrial release - which Ruth called "the one thing that's going really, really well" in our judicial system - or for which industry Clary planned to lobby were not returned. It's unlikely she'll be representing bail bondsmen, though: They're covered.

Tell Barry what you think at 919-836-2811 or send email to barry.saunders@newsobserver.com