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Bush Calls For Growth Legislation

By GARRETT THEROLF and WILLIAM MARCH The Tampa Tribune

Published: Apr 14, 2005

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TAMPA - Saying it is "probably the highest priority to get done this year," Gov. Jeb Bush pressed for legislation that would force the creation of infrastructure to keep pace with the state's burgeoning number of homes.

Bush issued his call in Tampa, where Hillsborough County has fiercely resisted new local home, gas and sales taxes to pay for infrastructure despite clogged roads and schools and scarce water supplies.

"So if Hillsborough County doesn't want to grow, fine. That's fine, but that should be the decision. It shouldn't be, no new taxes but go out and have another 1,000 units built in an area where the infrastructure doesn't exist," Bush said in a meeting with the Tribune's editorial board Tuesday.

In Florida, an estimated 1,000 newcomers arrive every day. Senate President Tom Lee, R-Brandon, and a developer who supports the legislation, has estimated that the state will have \$35 billion in unmet infrastructure needs during the next 10 years.

The legislation, which had been bottled up because it lacked a funding source, now looks like it will take a chunk of the state's latest revenue bonanza. State economists estimated Monday that Florida will reap another \$2 billion in tax revenue this coming fiscal year. Consensus was building in the House and Senate that at least \$400 million of that would go to fund growth management.

As a way to "jump start communities" to join with the state in funding growth, Bush also is proposing that Tallahassee provide \$10 billion for infrastructure needs over 10 years through a mixture of cash and bonds.

The legislation would require that the state shift its emphasis from water facilities to actual water supplies and that any development have a water supply in place within one year of occupancy. Schools and parks would face the same deadline. Roads would be required to be in place within three years, rather than the current five years or more.

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If local governments didn't come up with their share to fund the projects, development would be stopped, according to the legislation.

Sen. Michael Bennett, R- Bradenton, a sponsor, said that Hillsborough County, for instance, could levy an additional \$292 million a year in taxes and fees to pay for the growth and "buy all the roads they want for that."

However, Eric Johnson, Hillsborough County budget director, disputed the wisdom of raising property taxes. "I worry about a tax revolt" by residents, he said.

On school impact fees, the county also has stood firm. Since 1986, that fee has been \$196 for the average three- bedroom single-family home, making Hillsborough the second least expensive among Florida's 67 counties.

As the legislation was unveiled in the Senate during a committee hearing Tuesday, developers and environmentalists spoke in support of it. Many developers, however, are certain to oppose it as they see their fees going up.

Passage is likely to be difficult and some lawmakers say that only portions may survive.

As a hedge, Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, proposed standalone legislation to fund water supplies for the state. That is further along in the process than the larger growth management legislation.

Dockery's bill proposes that the state portion be funded through \$500 million collected during the coming decade when a homeowner signs a mortgage. The remaining \$4.5 billion would be funded by the federal government.

"It'll be a big year for growth management if any one component passes: roads, water or schools. All three would be a home run," Dockery said. Reporter Baird Helgeson contributed to this article.

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