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Bush hasn't paid the toll for growth

Critics: Money, not talk, needed

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Some observers and players in Florida's growth-management debates say the easy part is the talk, but the hard part is actually finding a way to pay for Florida's growth.

Gov. Jeb Bush, in his State of the State address last week, said Florida must find a way to help pay for roads, schools and other growth needs. But he didn't suggest any new taxes or say how the state would help pay for growth.

John DeGrove, secretary of the Florida Department of Community Affairs from 1983 to 1985, said the speech represents only "good talk" unless Bush can say how he wants to pay for growth.

"I don't see him coming up with proposals to generate a substantial amount of new money to fund the very things he talked about that are desirable," DeGrove said. "He didn't propose new taxes, did he?"

Bush also said decisions on allowing growth should be tied to the availability of roads, schools and other growth needs such as sewer and water lines.

But on the issue of how to pay for those needs, he said only that local and regional governments must shoulder that responsibility in their communities while "state government must fund infrastructure of statewide priority."

"These are complex issues with competing interests and no easy solutions," Bush said.

Since 2001, Bush has suggested that Florida should update its growth-management laws, which were approved in the 1970s and 1980s. But he's never been clear about what problems he wants fixed and why.

Senate President Tom Lee told the *Tallahassee Democrat* recently that he doesn't want a revamping of growth laws this session. He said he would rather see the funding issue addressed.

"I want to fix the problem. And I don't think the problem is systemic," Lee said. "I think the problem is of a financial nature."

House Speaker Allan Bense, R-Panama City, said he sees a need for changing how local and regional governments pay for growth.

Home builders are encouraged that the governor also is raising the money issue, said Doug Buck, director of governmental affairs for the Florida Home Builders Association. But they're also concerned by Bush's suggestion that decisions on whether to allow growth should be strictly tied to the availability of roads and schools.

Taxes on new development, particularly new large homes, are helping pay for new roads and schools across the state, Buck said. Home builders also face new surcharges or "impact fees" but only object, Buck said, when the revenue is used to pay for past failures to pay for growth.

"We keep getting the dog beat out of us - 'You're causing overcrowded schools and overcrowded roads,'" Buck said. "The problem (after we pay the surcharges) is still there."

DeGrove was the Community Affairs secretary in 1985 when Florida passed its landmark growth-management law, which required local governments to establish growth plans.

Part of the deal in approving the law, he said, was to enact the state tax on services - including newspaper and broadcast advertising - to help pay for growth.

But the tax, enacted in 1987, was repealed after a storm of protest. And the tax revenue that would have paid for roads and schools wasn't collected, DeGrove said.

Florida's population grew from an estimated 11.2 million in 1985 to an estimated 16.6 million in 2002, according to the University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

"I'm not ready to buy into Bush talking the talk unless I'm hearing something about walking the walk - finding the dollars to make this thing work," DeGrove said. "And it can work if we do that. And it won't work if we don't. And I haven't really seen much evidence he's willing to face up to that."

Calls to the governor's office seeking a response were referred to the Florida Department of Community Affairs.

A department spokesman said addressing the issue is the first step. He said experts on government funding are working on proposals.

"The governor has, in fact, acknowledged the issue and stated it needs to be addressed," said Rob Hayes, the department's communications director. "So we are early in the process."

Thaddeus Cohen, Bush's secretary of the Florida Department of Community Affairs, was asked about the money issue last month when he met with local-government officials in the Tallahassee region.

"I hear a lot about process," Tallahassee City Commissioner Debbie Lightsey said. "But I don't hear a lot about the funding of the infrastructure."

"That is an ongoing discussion, of course, at the Legislature," Cohen later responded. "As an agency, we don't do funding components."

The Senate Committee on Community Affairs has introduced SB 1886, which would make it easier for counties to raise gasoline and sales taxes without voter approval. But even some senators on the committee expressed reluctance about allowing taxes in counties where voters already have rejected them.

Another growth bill, HB 1453, was introduced in the House this week. Rep. Mike Davis, R-Naples, the bill's sponsor, said he expects a substitute bill to be offered by the governor's office in another week or so that addresses how growth needs would be paid for.

"I wouldn't want to venture a guess as to what they are thinking about," Davis said. "I think there is a lot of stuff out there on the table."

Hearings haven't been scheduled for either the House or Senate growth bills.

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