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Senate, House inch toward growth bill

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TALLAHASSEE - Growth management reform is coming down to the wire in the final week of the legislative session, with the House and Senate getting closer but still struggling with the crucial issue of a funding source.

House Speaker Allan Bense on Friday did not discount the possibility of a special session for the issue.

"I hope we can get it all done," said Bense, R-Panama City.

Local legislators such as Reps. Ron Reagan and Bill Galvano of Bradenton said they've heard rumors of a special session but nothing substantial.

Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, the Senate leader on growth management issues, said Friday that one of his bills was dead.

A bill that Bennett said would force counties to be more transparent with the use of their impact fees - the same bill that Manatee County Commissioner Joe McClash said would prevent counties from collecting impact fees - is going nowhere this session.

But Bennett's growth management plan will be taken up by the Senate on Wednesday. His controversial idea to make it easier for counties to raise local option sales taxes without a referendum is facing strong opposition in the House. In general, the House legislation gives less flexibility to counties in making their own growth decisions, while the Senate bill gives more flexibility.

Bennett's provision, which he says is not a tax increase but a way to give counties more flexibility to come up with roughly \$5 billion in unrealized tax revenue to help pay for growth, will be the major point of negotiations with the House.

The House will pass its own growth management legislation Monday and send it to the Senate. Then negotiations will begin, Bense said, giving legislators most of the final week of session to reach a compromise.

McClash and several other Manatee commissioners have been vocal in their opposition to Bennett's growth plan. They believe it passes the buck of raising taxes to local officials.

McClash sent a letter to Gov. Jeb Bush a few weeks ago, expressing support for concurrency requirements but disapproval for what Bennett wants to do with impact fees.

"I believe he's on the right track," McClash said about Bush's ideas, which mirror some of Bennett's. McClash likes the concurrency requirements with schools, roads and water. He said he'd like to see legislators wait until next year to finalize the plan.

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