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Senate: Growth, tax hike do mix

The idea won lukewarm support from a variety of groups, including environmentalists and real estate agents.

By JONI JAMES
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TALLAHASSEE - The Florida Senate has a plan to pay for Florida's future growth: Raise your local taxes.

Senate leaders, who unveiled their growth management plan Tuesday, want to give county commissions the authority, with a simple majority vote, to raise sales and gas taxes.

Current law requires voters to approve sales tax hikes. Gas taxes can be increased by voter referendum or a supermajority of the county commission.

The Senate's theory is that the additional revenue, potentially as much as \$2.7-billion annually statewide, would ease Florida's growing pains.

But the question ultimately is how well the plan will work in local communities, where higher taxes are the antithesis of good politics.

In Hillsborough County, for example, the commission twice in the last five years has beat back attempts to raise local option taxes.

The plan still has a major hurdle in the House, which has opposed any new taxes.

The Senate plan won tepid support Tuesday from a variety of groups, including Florida Association of Counties, environmentalists and real estate agents.

But no group offered its official endorsement because of what the plan lacks: state funds to pay for the needed construction or repair of roads, schools and water projects, including at least a \$23-billion backlog for state roads.

Five months after Senate President Tom Lee pledged to find a way to deal with the

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problem, money remains the linchpin in the debate.

At issue is not only how much the state will put on the table, but whether counties will be required to increase local taxes to get access to that state money.

Senate sponsor Michael Bennett, R-Bradenton, acknowledged his bill isn't complete and pledged it won't pass until it's fixed.

"As the (Senate) president has said, we won't have a growth management bill this year if we don't have that process," he said.

Both Lee and Gov. Jeb Bush have suggested that all or some of the expected \$2.2-billion in added tax revenue next year could help pay for the state's rapid growth.

But no consensus has emerged on longer-term funding, which Lee calls essential.

Lee has not proposed a specific plan, saying he prefers to negotiate quietly with House Speaker Allan Bense, who has said he's opposed to raising taxes.

"The bill is not perfect, but it's a first step," said Eric Poole, lobbyist for the counties association. "Our support will disappear if there isn't a statewide funding piece to address the backlog."

As for the local funding piece, Florida law allows local governments to charge as much as 2 percent more in sales tax than the statewide 6 percent rate. That additional sales tax money can be spent on infrastructure or other government needs.

Local gas taxes can reach 12 cents a gallon. That money must be used for roads. In the Tampa Bay area, Pinellas County charges the least local tax, 6 cents, while Hernando County collects the most, 9 cents.

No county in Florida takes full advantage of all that taxing authority.

Lawmakers say it's time that taxing potential is tapped.

The Senate wants to link a broader authority to levy taxes with tougher standards for permitting new developments.

Under the plan, for example, road capacity would have to be available within three years of when a new development is awarded a construction permit. Current law is five to seven years after the development is occupied, state transportation officials told a Senate panel Tuesday.

The taxing proposal comes as state lawmakers consider changes to one of the key ways counties have paid for infrastructure expansion in recent years: impact fees on new construction.

A homebuilder-backed bill that has passed two Senate committees would limit counties' ability to raise impact fees. Home builders say the fees are disproportionate in some counties and increase housing costs.

But counties are afraid of the change.

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"It would be devastating," Pinellas County Commissioner Susan Latvala said Tuesday of the impact-fee plan. "It is a huge amount of money that helps towards multimillion-dollar projects... Development should pay for itself. The taxpayers shouldn't continue to pony up."

--Times staff writers Michael Sandler and Bill Varian contributed to this report.

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