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Senator's Bill Amendment May Cost Counties

Some say Mike Bennett did it in retaliation to state counties' lobbyists.

By [Joe Follick](#)

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TALLAHASSEE -- Upsetting a senator can come at a cost. For Florida's counties, the tally might be about \$25 million.

With little warning, Bradenton Republican Sen. Mike Bennett on Thursday amended an 83-page bill dealing with technical changes to the state's building code to include this line on page 72:

"All costs associated with ensuring that appropriate new educational facilities can serve as public shelters for emergency management purposes shall be the responsibility of the county in which the facility is located."

The seemingly innocuous change would shift about \$25 million in costs from school districts to counties, whose lobbyists have been Bennett's legislative nemesis this year. Counties have railed against his efforts to limit their control of impact fees assessed on new construction.

Currently, Florida school districts must pay the additional cost of ensuring that some schools are built to withstand hurricanes and serve as community evacuation centers.

What Bennett had tucked into the bill would shift the so-called "hurricane hardening" requirement to counties in the future.

Bennett was angered by what he perceived as personal attacks made by county lobbyists and officials as they battled his plan to limit impact fees.

He seemed somewhat coy in explaining his motivation behind shifting the cost of "hurricane hardening" schools from districts to counties.

"That was a huge burden on the schools. They've been squealing," Bennett said. "The counties normally take over the schools (during emergency evacuations). So the costs associated with turning (schools) into shelters should be borne by the county.

"Is this in retaliation (against counties)? No, this is just good legislation. (It) just happens to coincide with counties making personal issues out of legislative issues," Bennett said with a laugh.

Florida Association of Counties lobbyist Bob McKee said Friday that the amendment popped "out of nowhere" and he has talked with Bennett about changing it.

"We just try to look at this from a policy direction," he said when asked about Bennett's apparent retaliation. "I can't speak to the senator's motivation."

Wayne Blanton, executive director of the Florida School Boards Association, said removing the cost of "hurricane hardening" has been a goal of schools for years. He estimated the annual cost to districts at about \$25 million -- as much as 10 percent of the total cost of construction. Not all schools are built to serve as shelters, he said.

Blanton said the result may be that neither counties nor school districts will pay the cost of preparing a school to act as a shelter. He's proposed a plan to establish a fund of state money that will pay for those needs in the future.

Bennett's impact fee effort has been all but killed in the Legislature this year, but he promised to try to attach it to another bill before the end of this year's legislative session May 6.
