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News Articles

**Board Meeting
February 15, 2012**

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Subject: FYI: special districts editorial of Ocala Star Banner...
Date: January 24, 2012 11:43:58 AM EST
To: Jack Sullivan <jesull@comcast.net>
Reply-To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>

— Forwarded Message —

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Sent: Tuesday, January 24, 2012 11:43 AM
Subject: special districts editorial of Ocala Star Banner...

IN OUR OPINION

Editorial: Scalpel, please

Published: Tuesday, January 24, 2012 at 6:30 a.m.

Last Modified: Monday, January 23, 2012 at 7:51 p.m.

As a reform-minded governor, Florida's Rick Scott thinks big. Whether it is prisons or universities or water management, he is not intimidated by demanding dramatic, even draconian, change.

So, it was not surprising when Scott last week ordered his Office of Policy and Budget to undertake a review of most of the state's 1,618 special taxing districts, hyper-local authorities that provide an array of public services ranging from utilities and mosquito control to low-income housing and community redevelopment.

The governor believes we do not need as many special districts as we have.

No one is saying the review is unneeded. In fact, most observers agree it is healthy. But a word of caution for the governor and the less-government crowd: perform this bureaucratic surgery with a scalpel, not an ax — as had too often been Scott's approach during his first year in office.

The sheer number of special districts alone speaks to their usefulness. All Florida special taxing districts were created to address a public need that other state and local government boards wouldn't or couldn't provide. For example, if a gated community wants to install water and sewer services and the local government can't or won't do it, it can request the creation of a special taxing district to fund the development and, later, operation of the utilities. Same goes for communities in need of a low-income housing program, like the Ocala Housing Authority, which is a special taxing district.

Yet, for all the lip service our state lawmakers give to the notion that the best government is that government which is closest to the people, the Florida Legislature relishes dictating to local government — about how much it can tax, about how it can spend, about what it can and cannot regulate, about what it, frankly, can and cannot do. And special districts are the most local of local government.

It is against that political backdrop that we view Scott's call to review the special taxing districts with a skeptical eye. There is no doubt that when we citizens are dealing with more than 1,600 governmental bodies, many of them obscure, if not invisible, that things can go wrong.

But these special taxing districts were created by either the Legislature or local governments because there was a need for a particular public service that otherwise was not being provided. If there is no longer a need for a special district or there is some chicanery, deal with it.

We encourage Scott's team to work with the various special districts and their local communities in carrying out its reviews to ensure that not only are tax dollars being spent prudently but that the districts are delivering the services they were created to provide and those services are still needed. If those standards are met, let them carry on their missions unfettered.

Cutting a layer of government simply because it spends \$15 billion a year and less government is the political battle cry of the moment is not good government.

Perform the special taxing district surgery with a scalpel, and it will be good for Florida.

Do it with an ax, and Scott will have injured the state and its people by bad government to eradicate good government.

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Subject: FYI: House panel unanimously passes proposed state water quality rule
Date: January 24, 2012 12:04:18 PM EST
To: Jack Sullivan <jesull@comcast.net>
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— Forwarded Message —

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Sent: Tuesday, January 24, 2012 11:47 AM
Subject: House panel unanimously passes proposed state water quality rule

House panel unanimously passes proposed state water quality rule changes
Bruce Ritchie, 01/24/2012 - 11:42 AM

A House committee on Tuesday unanimously approved proposed state water quality standards that would replace federal pollution limits that critics say are too expensive.

Scientists say Florida waterways have become choked with weeds and algae because of increased nitrogen and phosphorus levels from a variety of sources. The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** in 2009 raised a furor with industry and utility opponents when it agreed to adopt nitrogen and phosphorus limits to settle a federal lawsuit filed by environmental groups. The **Florida Department of Environmental Protection** has proposed rules that it says will cost less and provide flexibility in reducing nutrient pollution. But environmental groups that sued the EPA have filed an administrative challenge against the proposed state rules, saying they are weak and ineffective.

The **House Committee on Agriculture & Natural Resources** on Tuesday agreed to file **ANRS7**, a proposed committee bill that would waive requirements in state law that the Legislature ratify proposed rules costing more than \$1 million. Democrats and Republicans on the committee said they support moving forward with the state rule despite opposition from **Sierra Club Florida and Clean Water Action**.

"For me it is very hard to vote against the Sierra Club," said **Rep. Luis Garcia Jr.**, D-Miami. "But it is time to move on."

"What I really like about this effort is it now tosses the ball back to the federal government and EPA," said **Rep. Ray Pilon**, D-Sarasota.

"It is now their turn to prove to us here in the states they are willing to respect states' rights and the ability of states to work with them on such critical issues."

During the public comment on the bill, Sierra Club lobbyist **David Cullen** said Florida would be better off with the EPA rule than the proposed state rule.

And **Stephanie Kunkel** with Clean Water Action said there are not enough protections in the proposed state rule to protect clean water.

"Because of the fact you don't have a rule in front of you today and you are being asked to blindly approve a rule, we do urge you to reject ratification and send the rule back to DEP to address some of the inadequacies we see within the rule," Kunkel said.

David Childs, a lawyer representing wastewater utilities, said passing the bill would not prevent opponents from battling the proposed state rule in court. But he said it's important to send the proposed rules now to EPA for review.

"We could have EPA conceivably out of our backyard by the end of the year," Childs said. He represents the **Florida Water Environment Association – Utility Council**.

Bill supporters included **Associated Industries of Florida**, the **Florida Cattlemen's Association**, the **Florida Stormwater Association**, the **Florida Chamber of Commerce** and the **Florida League of Cities**.

Rep. Steve Crisafulli, R-Merritt Island and committee chairman, said the panel wasn't voting on the actual rule only because it is still being challenged.

"I think based on the process we have gone through and the conversation we have had, we understand what this rule is," he said. "I don't believe anybody blindly voted on anything."

ANRS7 now goes to **House Speaker Dean Cannon** to receive a bill number and committee assignments.

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Subject: FYI: JD urges changes to last year WMD budget cuts
Date: January 27, 2012 3:52:04 PM EST
To: Jack Sullivan <jesull@comcast.net>
Reply-To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>

— Forwarded Message —

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
Sent: Friday, January 27, 2012 3:51 PM
Subject: JD urges changes to last year WMD budget cuts

Sen. Alexander says water district budget cuts last year pleased no one, urges changes
Bruce Ritchie, 01/27/2012 - 11:22 AM

Sen. JD Alexander, the powerful **Senate Budget Committee** chairman, says no one was happy with the law changes made last year that involve budgeting by Florida's five water management districts — and now he's supporting new changes. Last year, **SB 2142** cut water management district property tax revenue by \$210 million. The bill also required water management district budgets to be approved by the **Legislative Budget Commission** in addition to the **Governor's Office**. Environmental groups were especially critical of the budget cuts. During an environmental rally at the Capitol in November, former **U. S. Sen. Bob Graham** called on **Gov. Rick Scott** to restore funding and take other actions to protect the environment.

This year, **SB 1834** would delete the property tax spending caps put in state law last year and replace them with new tax rate caps that would allow revenue to increase as property values rebound.

"I think we need a longer-term, more stable system but one that will help to check runaway spending," said Alexander, R-Lake Wales. "The bill seeks to find that balance."

Representatives of the water management districts say that in addition to eliminating positions and laying off employees, they plan to spend down much of their reserve funds in the next five years. Those reserves are needed to respond to hurricanes or other natural disasters.

SB 1834 would establish a separate tax rate in state law for "core" missions of the districts, such as water supply, flood control and protection of natural systems.

A separate tax rate would be established for regulatory, outreach, management and administrative programs. If the Legislature fails to set a tax rate caps for those programs then the districts cannot spend money on them.

SB 1834 also maintains budgetary oversight by the Legislature but less than what was required by the law changes in 2011. The bill requires the Legislature to approve preliminary budgets for the districts. Legislative Budget Commission approval would be required only for substantial modifications made when the water district boards eventually approve their budgets in September.

"I don't like it but it is better than what we have," said **Eric Draper**, executive director of **Audubon of Florida**. "It is better than last year (SB 2142). It is an improvement."

Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers and chairman of the **House Agriculture and Natural Resources Appropriations Subcommittee**, said she hasn't read the new Senate bill, which was filed last week. However, she said she's concerned about reopening the issue this year.

"I think we did enough to the water management districts last year," Williams said. "Most have new executive directors and boards. Let's see how they function. That would be my recommendation."

"If necessary we could do that legislation in a couple of years," she said.

Reporter Bruce Ritchie can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.