

Measures rise and fall as Legislature hits midpoint

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TALLAHASSEE — The 2014 Florida Legislature reaches its midpoint on Wednesday.

Lawmakers are moving forward on a \$75 billion state budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. They have already sent Gov. Rick Scott a bill cutting motorist fees by \$400 million.

Some bills are already dead, including an effort to revise alimony laws. Other issues remain in play, including flood insurance, gambling, gun bills, pension reform and red-light cameras.

Here's a look at the major issues before lawmakers, where they stand and what is likely to happen.

THE BUDGET

It is good to be a budget chairman this year. After several lean years caused by the recession, state revenues are rising, allowing lawmakers to increase spending in many areas in the new state budget, including a hefty boost for education, while still providing for a \$500 million tax-cutting package.

There are differences in the roughly \$75 billion House and Senate budget bills that will have to be worked out by early May. But the net result will be more state money for public schools, higher education and critical health care programs. Lawmakers are also able to finance other programs that lagged during the recession, including water and environmental initiatives, cultural and historical projects and economic development funding.

They will also set aside somewhere between \$1 billion and \$3 billion in reserves for future fluctuations in state revenue.

TAX CUTS

Lawmakers and Scott promised about \$500 million in election-year tax relief. The Legislature provided the bulk of those cuts by sending Scott a bill (SB 156) that will roll back many of the motor vehicle fees that lawmakers raised in 2009 as they struggled with declining revenues during the recession.

The motorist fee cuts take effect Sept. 1 and will save drivers of the heavier cars and trucks about \$25 a year in registration fees. Once fully implemented, the fee cut represents an annual savings of nearly \$400 million.

Other major elements in the tax-cutting package include back-to-school and hurricane-supply tax holidays. Lawmakers are still working out the details of those measures.

House and Senate members are also considering other tax cuts affecting cellphones and cable television bills, gym memberships, child car seats, bicycle helmets and energy-efficient appliances.

ENVIRONMENT

Two controversial deregulation bills continue to move through committees, pitting environmentalists against development interests.



Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, is advancing a plan to eliminate the state's Development of Regional Impact reviews in seven additional counties, including Sarasota and Manatee.

A wide-ranging proposal sponsored by Rep. Jimmy Patronis, R-Panama City, that touches on water issues and land planning has been scaled back, but activists are still fighting some provisions. Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, also is advancing a plan to eliminate the state's Development of Regional Impact reviews in seven additional counties, including Sarasota and Manatee. The legislation cleared a third Senate committee last Thursday, but it has not been heard in the House.

Sierra Club lobbyist David Cullen said he is "trepidatiously optimistic" efforts to soften the bills will prevail.

Both chambers also approved budgets this week with significant funds for environmental programs. The House wants to spend more than \$130 million on Everglades restoration, the Senate \$158 million.

BOOZE BILLS

Beer tastings may soon be coming to a community near you, while craft breweries face an uphill climb to get 64-ounce growlers approved.

Legislation sponsored by Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, that would legalize beer tastings at supermarkets and other establishments passed a second Senate committee last Tuesday and is poised to pass the full House.

There appears to be little opposition to the tasting bill, while the growler measure is fiercely contested by beer

distributors and retailers who worry about competition from breweries. Opponents have bogged down the growler legislation with provisions requiring more regulation of craft breweries.

Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, is trying to broker a compromise but the two sides appear to be far apart.

VACATION RENTALS

Legislation that would allow more local government oversight of vacation rentals flew through the Senate, passing the full chamber last week. But the House bill is moving more slowly and has significant differences.

Galvano amended the Senate bill seeking a compromise with vacation rental managers, who want less oversight, and local governments, which want total control of rentals. The Senate legislation allows communities to ban nightly, but not weekly, rentals. But it is still strongly opposed by rental managers. They support the House bill, which has more limitations on local government regulation.

Vacation rentals have been a hot-button issue in beach communities around the state — including Venice, Holmes Beach and Anna Maria — because of issues with noise, trash and other problems.

INSURANCE

Tackling Florida's flood insurance problem suddenly became less urgent after Congress rolled back reforms this month that were boosting rates, but state lawmakers are still moving legislation aimed at encouraging more private flood policies.

The Senate bill passed the full chamber unanimously last Wednesday, but it has major differences with the House measure. The dispute centers on whether homeowners should be able to purchase less coverage than a property's full value. The Senate says yes; House members are worried policyholders could be left without adequate coverage in a disaster.

Lawmakers also are considering more Citizens Property Insurance changes. Legislation that would increase rates for new master condo policies and allow unregulated "surplus lines" insurers to take policies out of the state-run insurer cleared one Senate committee, but there was significant opposition. Lawmakers seem wary of passing controversial property insurance legislation during an election year.

MOTORISTS

A move to ban red-light cameras in Florida has faltered. But Senate Transportation Chairman Jeff Brandes, R-St.

Petersburg, is trying to keep the issue alive by advancing a bill that would add new restrictions to the use of the cameras by local governments. A bill is still moving in the House that would require traffic engineering studies before the cameras are installed.

Meanwhile, a bill allowing speed limits up to 75 mph is ready for a Senate floor vote. The measure would allow the Department of Transportation to decide what areas of interstate highways could allow a 5 mph increase in the maximum speed limit. The bill is opposed by safety advocates and law enforcement groups.

A similar House bill has one more committee stop before it can reach the House floor.

EDUCATION

As public schools move away from the FCAT to a new assessment based on a revised version of the Common Core standards, lawmakers are moving a bill to temporarily ease the school grading system as the districts adjust to the new measurements.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, wants to expand the use of publicly funded scholarships — or vouchers — to send students to private schools. The measure has stumbled in the Senate, where leaders want the voucher expansion tied to new testing requirements for the private-school students.

Lawmakers are also considering legislation that would increase the number of charter schools. And maintenance and construction funding for charter schools is a key issue in the budget debate, as the House wants to give \$100 million to the charter schools and the Senate has \$50 million.

State universities and colleges will see a significant increase in state spending but it will be tied to new performance formulas that measure things like the time to earn a degree and job placement for the graduates. But tuition hikes are out this year.

HEALTH CARE

The Blake Medical Center in Bradenton is one of three trauma centers that could win approval to continue to operate under bills moving in both House and Senate. Blake, along with trauma centers elsewhere, has been at the center of a dispute between hospitals trying to start new trauma units and the hospitals with the longstanding trauma centers.

In addition to approving Blake, a Senate bill would also temporarily impose a \$15,000 fee limit on the centers — after a Tampa Bay Times report questioned the cost of treatment at the centers.

On another front, the Legislature is expected to again reject any effort to expand Medicaid, the state-federal health care program for the poor and disabled, under the federal health care law.

Lawmakers are also expected to reject any effort to let local governments regulate public smoking — even at playgrounds — while a measure to ban the sale of E-cigarettes to minors remains in debate.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Bills creating new sentencing standards for juveniles convicted of murder and other serious crimes are headed to the Senate and House floor in the coming week. Lawmakers have been forced to address the issue because of a series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings that have held that juveniles cannot receive life sentences without a hearing to weigh evidence that might mitigate their responsibility.

More than a half-dozen bills involving the use of guns in Florida are still moving in the Legislature.

The most prominent include a bill that would ban prosecutors from going after someone who fires a warning shot in self-defense. It has already passed the House. Other bills would prevent the punishment of students who pretend they are playing with guns and another prohibits insurance companies from discriminating against gun owners.

Other more contentious gun measures include a bill sponsored by Steube that would allow some official to carry firearms in schools. It is opposed by the school districts. Another bill would allow Floridians to carry concealed weapons during emergencies. It is opposed by law enforcement groups.

UP IN THE AIR

Several major issues remain unresolved and could be in jeopardy this year. They include an effort to pass a sweeping gambling initiative that would allow major casinos in South Florida while limiting the further expansion of gambling in the state. The issue is complicated by ongoing negotiations over a separate gambling agreement between the state and the Seminole Tribe, which operates its own casinos.

Weatherford is continuing to press for a measure to move new public workers who rely on the state pension fund into investment plans more similar to 401(k)-type plans used by private companies. But senators say Weatherford may not be able to pass the measure in the Senate.

The annual 60-day session is scheduled to end on May 2.

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