County officials outline priorities

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With Florida positioned for another economically bleak year, Osceola County and other local governments vying for financial support from the state are at risk of not receiving much help once the new legislative session kicks off in March.

According to state Rep. Mike Horner, R-Kissimmee, Florida is set for another severe budget shortage next year.

“This is not the year to ask for things that have a significant fiscal impact,” he said. “It’s going to be even tougher to cut programs.”

County officials are now reviewing their legislative priorities, and will approve a final list by December.

Plans by the state Legislature to extend the amount of time state criminals can be detained in county jails from one year to 18 months have local officials worried that they will be unable to afford the costs that will be required to keep up with the change.

County officials said they are planning to lobby against the proposed law, which will be considered by Florida lawmakers once the new legislative session begins March 2. They counted the proposed law as one of their top legislative priorities.

Counties are currently required to build, staff and operate jails to hold defendants sentenced to one year or less. Defendants sentenced more than a year are transferred to the state’s prison system.

By extending the county jail stay of state prisoners to 18 months, local taxpayers would be responsible for the costs connected to maintaining state prisoners for longer periods.

Corrections Department Director Greg Futch said the change would have “a tremendous impact” on the already overcrowded county jail system.

Even with plans to expand the jail by an additional 1,500 beds for county prisoners, if state prisoners were held in county custody for longer periods, the jail’s population would double, making the planned expansion not large enough.

“We would still have to build additional beds to support whatever projected numbers that impact would bring,” Futch said. “I don’t think that (state) funding would be anywhere near enough to not only cover the new construction, but operating costs, too.”

Horner said he is unsure about the bill’s future, but would be opposed to the non-funded state mandate coming to Osceola County.

After approving a series of deregulations through Senate Bill 360 during the last legislative session, lawmakers also began to review plans for a mobility fee that would fund roadway and transit projects.

County Growth Management Director Dave Tomek said the new fee, which would be imposed on contractors, is a part of the state’s plan for a new, “impact-fee plus” system.

“You’re looking at ways to make a supreme impact fee for roadways, and they’re talking about transit options as kind of an after fact,” Tomek said.

The Florida Department of Transportation is in the middle of a pilot study to revive the proposed mobility fee, which Tomek said would be charged and collected similarly to the way impact fees are currently collected.

“What they’re currently looking at is a more countywide funding source,” Tomek said.

County planning and growth administrators also asked officials to lobby for fewer restrictions when it comes to changing pieces of the county’s comprehensive plan.

The comprehensive plan, which serves as the county’s blueprint for growth, can be amended, but currently requires a referendum vote to do so.

A proposed change would eliminate the referendum portion depending on the amount of land and population that would be affected, and allow the county to shift land uses and zoning in the comprehensive plan without taking it to the polls and to the state for approval.

“In other words, they’ll let you draw your boundaries, and within your urban growth boundary, you can shift commercial, residential (zoning), as long as you don’t exceed your thresholds,” Tomek said.

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