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## CAPITOL NEWS

Local government resolutions stir debate over offshore drilling

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From Miami Beach to Tarpon Springs to tiny Captiva Island, Florida's coastal governments and civic boosters are jumping feet first into the turbulent debate over offshore drilling. Nearly 20 local governments and chambers of commerce have passed resolutions opposing moves by Congress or the Republican-led Legislature to promote offshore drilling in Florida. At least one local government arm, the Brevard County Tourist Development Council, is on record in support.

Proponents say resolutions are premature before objective analysis of the proposal and further point to polling that indicates a majority in favor of drilling.

Tallahassee Mayor John Marks, recently elected president of the Florida League of Cities, said the association has yet to take a stance on the issue, and is in no hurry to do so.

"I'm not even sure when we will take a position," he said. "It's too early yet."

Supporters and opponents are meeting this week with a league advisory committee to make their cases.

Eric Draper, a lobbyist for Audubon of Florida and a chief opponent of offshore drilling, said the list of local governments opposing drilling belies recent polling by the industry.

This summer, Associated Industries of Florida touted a poll it commissioned by McLaughlin & Associates that showed 75 percent of Floridians supported, at least in concept, allowing offshore drilling in Florida. Twenty percent were opposed. Pollsters interviewed 600 likely voters Aug. 12-13. The poll had a margin of error of 4 percentage points.

However, the same poll showed that when asked if drilling should be allowed anywhere on the Florida coast, support dropped to just 16 percent.

"We know that there is a hard-core number of people who think that cheap gas is more important than anything else," Draper said. "The rest of their support is very soft."

Nobody, including the industry, believes that if lawmakers approve offshore drilling, that gas prices will automatically plunge. It could take a decade before anyone realizes full production. But opponents accuse the industry of taking advantage of the latest gasoline crisis.

All of which is nonsense, said Florida Petroleum Council spokesman Dave Mica.

"Everything that I hear about public opinion is that we continue to see more and more support," he said.

Mica and other supporters point to the Florida Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus, an umbrella group, that has already come out in favor of offshore drilling.

Associated Industries of Florida President Barney Bishop isn't worried about non-binding local resolutions, the result, he claims, of, "knee-jerk" reactions and grandstanding politicians.

"I don't know what kind of debate they had, if any, in any of these commissions," he said. "These are just out-of-touch politicians."

Bishop said more light will be shed on the debate in December when the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida is planning a series of public forums to vet the scientific and economic claims of both sides. The group is managed by the state Department of Community Affairs and was created by the Legislature in 2005 as a neutral vehicle to debate large public-policy questions.

"It's a place where I think there will be an objective analysis," he said.

Ericka D'Avanzo, regional manager for the environmental group Surfrider Foundation, said its 5,000 members are pushing local governments to pass anti-drilling resolutions. Chief targets are cities and counties in the districts of lawmakers who support offshore drilling, she said.

"If we can do that, I think we can turn the tide," she said.

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