

Environmentalists call 2011 'worst year' for protection

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Signaling major rollbacks in Florida's development permitting and water quality rules, a series of bills loathed by environmentalists and lauded by business leaders moved close to final passage in the Florida Legislature Thursday.

Republican lawmakers said the bills repealing growth management and clean water protections will remove burdensome regulation, spark economic growth and save state residents millions. Similar rationale has been used to justify a host of other regulatory rollback proposals, as lawmakers have argued that less government intervention in private enterprise will spur the economy.

"I'm thinking that's a huge tax that I'm repealing if I repeal this bill today," said Rep. Marti Coley, R-Marianna, in advocating for a bill to legislate mandatory septic tank inspections.

But environmental advocates said they are ready to declare 2011 the worst year in decades for environmental protection in Florida.

"It's been a very troubling session as far as keeping the state's protection of our land and water resources intact," said Janet Bowman of the Nature Conservancy.

Much of the state's 1985 Growth Management Act would be repealed under a bill that cleared its final Senate committee Thursday and now goes to the full chamber for a vote. A similar House bill is poised for passage.

The legislation largely takes the state out of development reviews, giving more power to local officials. Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, said the reduced permitting would spark new development.

"We're trying to create jobs," he said.

But Democrats complained that the growth management rewrite was rushed through its final committee with just 10 minutes of public comment. Sen. Nan Rich, D-Weston, said she had numerous concerns that went unheard because Republican senators wanted to move the bill forward before the committee's time ran out.

"There has to be oversight; the state has a role," Rich said. "We have seen what happens when development is allowed to run rampant without mechanisms to control it."

Democrats had better luck raising concerns about three water quality bills debated on the House floor Thursday.

The bills would:

- Repeal a law enacted last year requiring all 2.3 million septic tanks in Florida to

be inspected every five years. Roughly 10 to 20 percent of septic tanks are failing and leaking raw sewage into aquifers, but Republican lawmakers said the estimated \$250 to \$500 inspection cost was too burdensome for homeowners.

- Delay by five years the deadline to increase treatment standards for sewage treatment plants that dump waste directly into the ocean, a bill that led Rep. Ron Saunders, D-Key West, to ask the sponsor if "you don't think that tourists mind swimming in sewage water?"
- Decriminalize the act of spreading invasive water hyacinths, an invasive plant that chokes waterways and makes them unnavigable. Democrats noted that state and local governments spend millions annually removing the plant.

The septic tank inspections drew the most debate.

Bowman said the inspections are "low hanging fruit," describing them as a relatively inexpensive way to improve water quality compared with installing sewer lines and other treatment options.

Democrats echoed those concerns in opposing the repeal bill.

"Isn't it part of what we need to be doing to clean up Florida's groundwater?" asked Rep. Michelle Rehwinkle Vasilinda, D-Tallahassee.

Coley said Floridians overwhelmingly oppose the inspections.

"The citizens of Florida have stood up and said this is intrusive and it is far overreaching for government," she said.

In contrast to the debate on other bills, one piece of water quality legislation drew unanimous support from Republicans, Democrats and environmentalists. All sides agreed to legislation that allows local governments to keep restrictions on applying fertilizer during rainy summer months, and provides a path for governments without the restrictions to adopt their own standards.

Only the water hyacinth bill passed the House Thursday. The other bills are expected to pass the full chamber today.

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