

Tampa Bay Times

Gov. Scott slow to scrutinize special taxing districts



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TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Rick Scott sounded determined a year and a half ago when he demanded a thorough review of obscure special taxing districts that have the power to "tax, spend and incur debt at the expense of Florida taxpayers."

Scott was surprised that so many appointees who never have to face voters had the power to tax, so he signed an order on Jan. 11, 2012, ordering his budget experts to scrutinize nearly 1,700 districts and whether they serve "a legitimate public interest."

Eighteen months later, the districts are still thriving, as Scott's tough talk meets the reality that special districts have clout.

Across Florida, special taxing districts levy taxes to provide services such as fire protection, flood control, mosquito control, children's services and community development. Some districts are controlled by elected officials and others by political appointees, many chosen by Scott and his predecessors, and were created to pay for roads, street lights and other infrastructure. (Pinellas alone has about two dozen of them.)

Special taxing districts helped Walt Disney Co. redesign the character of Central Florida and enabled developer Gary Morse to build The Villages, a golfing mecca and mega-retirement community close to major highways in three Florida counties.

To Scott, some special taxing districts are better than others.

"Gosh. Let's take The Villages as an example. They've gone from scratch to 91,000 people," Scott said. "People love to live there. They're buying into those amenities."

Scott said he sees no problem with giving special taxing authority to help The Villages become a magnet for retirees — many of whom vote Republican — by financing infrastructure through community development districts with power to issue bonds, backed by assessments charged to Villages homeowners.

Morse is a major supporter of the Republican Party of Florida and Scott. The developer has given \$100,000 to Scott's re-election committee, Let's Get to Work, and The Villages has given another \$100,000.

So far, Scott's study has barely scratched the surface, with a study of the 18 elected mosquito control districts stretching from the Keys to Walton County in the Panhandle. The study said that while mosquito control is handled by many counties, the districts' independence has encouraged innovation and cited Pasco County as a good example.

The study also said that the mosquito districts' property tax collections have declined 43 percent since 2006, when adjusted for inflation.

A spokesman for Scott said the special tax district study is continuing and that it has been harder to collect detailed data on every type of special district than had been anticipated.

Scott's wariness about special taxing districts resurfaced when he vetoed three bills last week to expand powers of small special taxing districts in Hendry, Indian River and Lee counties. All three bills had broad local support and passed the Legislature unanimously.

Scott, who's seeking a second term and emphasizing holding down the cost of living, said the bills would create "duplicative taxation" on families and give districts too much power.

"It's disappointing, but I see his position," said Rep. Debbie Mayfield, R-Vero Beach, who sponsored one of the bills. "Next year, we need to structure the bill differently."

Mayfield's bill (HB 1009) sought to spur development of 27,000 acres in Fellsmere by providing services that are not local government priorities.

Attorney Christopher Lyon, a lobbyist for two of the three bills, said the goal of one bill (HB 855) was to build a park in Palm Beach County, and that neither the city nor the county wanted to pay for it, but residents had raised more than \$100,000 toward the park's construction.

"We felt it was what the residents wanted," Lyon said. "There was really no other option ... This isn't something that the district dreamed up to give itself more power."

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