

## County officials push legislative agenda



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**News-Gazette Photo/Andrew Sullivan**

*From left, District 49 Rep. Darren Soto, D-Orlando, State Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, and District 79 Rep. Mike Horner, R-Kissimmee, along with other State Senate and House of Representative officials met Dec. 18 in the Osceola County Commission chambers.*

**By Jessica Solis**

Staff Writer

Poinciana incorporation and Osceola County's legislative priorities dominated this year's legislative delegation meeting Friday.

The meeting gave local officials the chance to present to lawmakers their legislative agenda for the upcoming session, and for locals, as well as organizations, to the air their issues to state officials.

Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, and Sen. Gary Siplin, D-Orlando, did not attend Friday's annual gathering of the seven legislators who represent Osceola County at the state level. Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Indialantic, who will lead the Senate as its president during the new session, left the meeting early.

County officials requested funding to open a local Primary Care Access Network (PCAN) clinic in Buenaventura Lakes, similar to Orange County's PCAN system.

Rep. Darren Soto, D-Orlando, whose district includes Buenaventura Lakes, said he would support the project at the Tallahassee level and help secure funds for it.

"They've been very successful in Orange County," Soto said. "That's going to be priority number one for me."

The county would provide a location for the clinic, which would work as part of a network of hospitals, health care centers and community agencies aimed at assisting uninsured and underinsured individuals, most of whom are unemployed or at low-income levels.

The clinic would be open 40 hours weekly. Officials estimate the clinic could see about 30,000 patients a year.

County officials also urged the delegation to oppose legislation that could increase the amount of time individuals are detained in county jails from one year to 18 months. Counties are currently required to hold only those defendants sentenced to a maximum of one year. Defendants sentenced more than one year are transferred to the state's prison system.

Local officials have said the change would be costly for the county, and further increase the population of the overcrowded Osceola County Jail.

Lawmakers said the legislation was not being discussed at the state level.

"I doubt it's going to happen," Sen. Paula Dockery, who heads the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, said.

The candidate for governor said that lawmakers have been discussing the system of prison sentences lasting a year and a day, which then makes the state's prison system responsible for the inmate.

"I think we need to look at who's in there (prison) and who doesn't need to be in there," Dockery said, adding that a reason for overcrowding in many of the state's prisons can be attributed to the large number of individuals detained for non-violent crimes such as suspended licenses.

Proponents and critics of Poinciana becoming a city spoke and made their cases to the delegation for a second time. In October, lawmakers representing Poinciana on both the Osceola and Polk county sides met with residents. Representatives for both counties said there was a lack of total community support, and that instead of incorporation; other alternatives should be reviewed to solve Poinciana's problems.

Supporters have said making Poinciana a city could result in better services and maintenance of the community. They asked lawmakers to leave the decision to residents by having a vote on incorporation. The Legislature's approval is required before it can appear on the ballot.

"Poinciana deserves the right," Keith Laytham, who heads the Poinciana Residents for Smart Change group, said.

Laytham said Poinciana's location, which sits between Polk and Osceola counties, has caused it to be neglected by both governments.

"When it comes to spending priorities, Poinciana ... ranks far below the cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud in Osceola and Lakeland and Winter Haven and Bartow in Polk in terms of county priorities," he said.

Opponents have said that incorporation would result in higher taxes for Poinciana residents, and that nothing inside the community is guaranteed to improve as a result of incorporation.

Some also have called the feasibility study to review the community's ability to become a city flawed and incomplete.

"The study makes no attempt to improve law enforcement for Poinciana, leaving the status quo intact," Jeffery Goldmacher, who formed the Committee Opposed to Poinciana Incorporation (COPI), said. "There are better methods to improve the Poinciana community without incorporating."

Only Soto made a motion to put incorporation on the ballot. It failed to gather support from the rest of the delegation.

He said both sides made a strong case that should have been left up to residents, instead of lawmakers.

“But this may not be the year, apparently,” Soto said.

At the public school level, Osceola County School District Superintendent Michael Grego told lawmakers to give schools more flexibility due to a voter-approved amendment that will require schools to significantly reduce the number of students in classrooms by next school year.

The mandate calls for classrooms to have 18 students in pre-kindergarten through third grade, 22 students in grades four through eight and 25 students in high school classes.

The class size amendment is being opposed by the Central Florida School Board Coalition, which includes Osceola school officials.

The amendment would require the county to hire at least 150 more teachers at a time when the local system is struggling economically.

Grego said lawmakers should consider adding caps to the amendment that would allow schools to increase the amount of students in classrooms.

"This provides us with the ability to have parental choice," Grego said.

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