



Gov. Crist signs Fla. growth management bill

By BILL KACZOR

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A growth management bill supported by business and development interests but opposed by environmentalists and local governments became law with Gov. Charlie Crist's signature Monday.

Crist said he hopes the bill (SB 360) will boost Florida's sagging construction industry and create new jobs by making it easier to build in urban areas and extending the life of existing development permits for two years. Other provisions are designed to promote affordable housing development.

"I know that it's probably one of those bills where nobody's going to be overly happy on either side," Crist said. "So, hopefully it's right down the middle and will be able to stimulate our economy and not do harm to our beautiful state."

Environmentalists, the growth management advocacy group 1000 Friends of Florida and the Florida Association of Counties had urged a veto. They argued the legislation will encourage sprawl and make Florida's roadways even more crowded than they are now.

"This is going to be a disappointment to the citizens of Florida who are already frustrated by traffic congestion," said Florida Association of Counties spokeswoman Cragin Mosteller. "This is a big setback."

Most of the argument has been over a provision designed to correct an unintended consequence of an existing growth management law that requires ample roads and other transportation facilities to be in place before development can occur. That's a concept known as "transportation concurrency."

It was aimed at containing sprawl but has had the opposite result. Instead of focusing growth in urban areas, concurrency has shifted it to outlying and rural areas because roads there are less congested and cheaper to build.

The new law is intended to channel that growth back into cities by lifting transportation concurrency requirements in what are termed dense urban areas. State review of large regional developments also will no longer be required in those areas.

The problem is the measure's 1,000 people-per-square-mile definition of an urban area is too broad and will include suburban and rural sectors, said 1000 Friends president Charles Pattison.

"The areas being exempted are not the ones that are urban and dense," Pattison said. "This is clearly meant to benefit development interests."

Those interests certainly are happy with the new law.

"Our economy needs the shot in the arm that this legislation will provide," said John Sebree, the Florida Association of Realtors vice president for public policy.

Associated Industries of Florida president and CEO Barney Bishop said the state's prosperity hinges on its ability to grow and the new law will provide a spark by "easing the regulatory burdens that have been stifling economic growth."

Florida Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Mark Wilson also praised the legislation while criticizing "special interests and others" for making "a last-minute push to politicize" the issue.

Crist also cited a provision calling for a study of mobility fees that would replace transportation concurrency and spread costs for new roads and other facilities more broadly across communities.

The fee concept has drawn support from all sides in the growth management debate, but Pattison noted the state already is conducting the study, so there was no need to put it in the law. The results are expected to be ready for next year's legislative session.