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By RYAN MILLS

The Sun

Westchester Gold & Diamonds

Beaches are incredibly important to the economic viability of the state.

Some advocates of local beach programs would tell you they could save millions and help rebuild more beaches. Florida needs a stronger, focused program with enough money to help protect its 825 miles of sandy shores visited each year by 17 million people who generate billions for the state beach budget, beach businesses and the state economy.

"Beaches are incredibly important to the economic viability of the state," said Rep. Ben Albritton, R-Merritt Island, who has proposed a bill in both the House and Senate that would create a special funding source for beach renourishment projects.

But the concerns with DEP's ranking system have also undervalued the beach communities of Flagler and Volusia counties, where you could find stretches of shore that are 10 feet high, and 10 miles wide. And the oceanfront communities of Painter's Landing, Beverly Beach and Flagler Beach that are not next door to one another.

"I consider this a good start," Albritton said. "I think it needs to go forward in progress over the next few years. It's better than doing nothing and we're going to keep on working it." 

Political influence

Albritton's plan would affect all stages of beach projects, not just the lawmakers ultimately making the decisions on how money goes. Most years, he said, no beach projects make it into the budget law that will be considered by the Legislature this spring. DEP's priority list is produced, "but the changes the Legislature makes do not necessarily reflect the will of the people as much as beach communities of Flagler and Volusia counties, where you could find stretches of shore that are 10 feet high, and 10 miles wide. And the oceanfront communities of Painter's Landing, Beverly Beach and Flagler Beach that are not next door to one another.

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