

# Wish lists long for legislators

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As the dust settles on the New Year, state lawmakers are wasting little time in setting their 2017 agenda.

Members of the Charlotte and Sarasota counties Legislative Delegation recently announced meetings to kick off 2017, hoping to gain insight from local governments, businesses, special interest groups and the public. The meetings help lawmakers determine which local bills to consider filing for the upcoming legislative session.

A meeting is planned in Sarasota County Wednesday, Jan. 18, at 9 a.m. at the Sarasota County Administration Building. Charlotte County has its scheduled a day later, Thursday, Jan. 19, at 9 a.m. at the Punta Gorda Isles Civic Association.

Lawmakers, primarily, will listen to the needs of their constituents during each session. And many say it's a crap shoot as to what to expect. That said, both counties face similar needs and legislators have a hunch what pitches for change they will hear.

Common themes may be worker's compensation, mental health funding, homelessness, affordable housing, environmental issues and beach renourishment. And with the political shift in the White House, a concern from the public may be Medicaid/ Medicare reform.

Of the issues, though, worker's compensation and mental health may be the most pressing.

Both Charlotte and Sarasota counties have listed mental and behavioral health as legislative priorities this year. Statewide, Florida is 49th overall in terms of mental health spending, beating out only Idaho.

The state spends \$37.28 per person annually on services compared to the national average of \$125, according to State Mental Health Agency data.

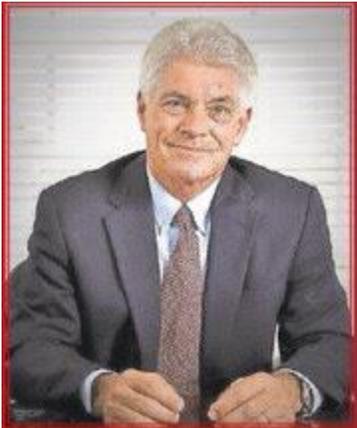
State Rep. Julio Gonzalez (R-Venice) includes homelessness, substance and drug overdose in the mental health spectrum. He says the rising problem is "Overwhelming and the most dire issue we face as a state. We're bleeding money and lives and it needs addressed."

Gonzalez, the chairman of the Sarasota County Legislative Delegation, is calling for a statewide network of mental health facilities. "The question is: what do we do next? There are a lot of solutions. And any of them are better than no intervention at all."

State Sen. Greg Steube (R-Sarasota) introduced a bill three weeks ago to tackle the rising drug epidemic, specifically fentanyl and synthetic drugs by creating criminal penalties for both. It's been referred to the criminal justice and judiciary subcommittees.

"They're cutting heroin with carfentanil. That's a tranquilizer for elephants," said Steube, who sits on both Charlotte and Sarasota legislative delegations. He's pushing for temporary mental health residency at the Salvation Army, an option typically reserved for the homeless.

**Mike Grant**



**Greg Steube**



**Julio Gonzalez**



The workman's compensation quandary may affect every business with more than four employees, rocking both the private sector and local municipalities and affecting the state's economy. Steube says companies may move to a free market approach to drive down rates.

A perennial issue and priority in both Charlotte and Sarasota counties, as well as across the state, is beach renourishment. And after Florida was slammed by hurricanes and tropical storms last year, the need for funds statewide will only increase.

Hurricanes Matthew and Hermine combined to cause \$77 million in damage to Florida beaches. The Legislature OK'd \$32 million for beach renourishment projects in its most recent budget, leaving a lot of projects unfunded.

"We're all very supportive of beach renourishment. It's an important economic driver," said state Rep. Michael Grant (R-Port Charlotte), the chairman of the Charlotte County Legislative Delegation.

With natural erosion and the rising of sea levels, beach renourishment is not an easy or inexpensive fix. "We're trying to fight Mother Nature. And it's a problem we'll have to throw money at," Gonzalez said.

"This is not just normal shifting of sand, but it's a rise in sea level that will have serious implications," he added. "Every year it becomes harder to protect our beaches."

One of the top priorities for Sarasota County is funding the expansion and elevation of River Road and extension of the Legacy Trail. The affordable housing crisis is also high on its radar.

Although, with a seemingly growing list of issues to tackle, prioritizing them and coming up with the money to support a solution, perhaps, is the greatest obstacle. "If you have a great idea, the challenge becomes finding the funding. Sometimes it's taking that money from somewhere else," Gonzalez says.

With an overall budget of \$82.3 billion, Florida's general fund is expected to grow by 3.5 percent to 4 percent over the next three years thanks in large part to tourism and an increasing workforce. But the state faces a looming \$1.3 billion deficit next year due to out-of-control spending and two decades of tax cuts, according to Florida TaxWatch.

"Our economy is doing well. More money is coming into the state. But it's not keeping pace with the demand," said Grant, adding he's not pushing for a raise in the state's 6 percent sales tax, adding "residents will have to live with what they can afford."

Education, which has an overall budget of \$31.8 billion, isn't expected to take a hit as Senate President Joe Negron (R-Stuart) has made it a priority. Medicaid and Medicare, though, may see a decrease as its future hangs in the balance.

An orthopedic surgeon, Gonzalez says he'd be surprised if there wasn't a reform on either Medicaid or Medicare. Hypothesizing, he said there may be a loosening of restrictions for how states can administer Medicaid funds. And in regards to Medicare, he sees a regulatory change that would make it easier for hospitals and physicians to care for their own patients.

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