



Legislators go way out of bounds

If this year's Florida legislative session were a football game, the penalty flags would be flying.

Talk about offsides.

The latest example of flagrant fouls by legislative leaders involves whipsawing insurance regulations.

Over in the House, Speaker Marco Rubio presides over a let-the-private-market-work philosophy that grabs \$250 million from Citizens Property Insurance Corp. reserves to help start-up private, for-profit insurance companies.

This happened earlier this week at the same time Florida's chief financial officer, Alex Sink, warned of fiscal ruin unless the state-run insurer of last resort builds up bigger reserves.

On the Senate side, meanwhile, cooler heads prevail - the Senate would extend the rate freeze for Citizens to June 2009 (it's now due to expire in December of this year).

The Senate also wants to permanently eliminate the industry practice of raising rates first and then filing with the state for approval.

The latter has been a major rallying cry for Fair Insurance Rates in Monroe (FIRM), which has sent Heather Carruthers and Colleen Repetto to Tallahassee this session to keep an eye on mischief makers in the state Capitol.

They are concerned about the threat of rate hikes that loom, especially if the House version gains traction.

During early committee drafts, House policy makers wanted to outright grab \$250 million from Citizens reserves to fund start-up competitors. That idea, fortunately, caught some heavy flak and a compromise will require those for-profit firms to repay Citizens over the next 20 years.

And this barely touches the vast differences that emerged this year in the way House and Senate leaders approached dealing with the worst revenue crisis in decades.

Bob Butterworth, former Florida attorney general and now secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services, told The Miami Herald's Mary Ellen Klas that budget cuts are destroying the state's public safety net.

"In my 40 years in public service, this is the worst year I've even seen, the meanest I've ever seen."

So raiding Citizens' reserves to help for-profit insurance companies skim off the most lucrative windstorm policies from Citizens may be just the start of even worse things to come.

In today's Keynoter, you'll read about school staffing cuts being recommended by School District Superintendent Randy Acevedo. And the county has already begun downsizing staff, increasing fees and is eyeing a gas-tax hike.

With weeks to go in this year's legislative session, who knows how many more penalty flags await?



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