

Worries grow with lawmaker's plan to kill tree rules

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Posted Nov 13, 2017 at 6:55 PM

Updated Nov 13, 2017 at 6:55 PM

Tree canopies in Alachua County and Gainesville are considered some of the most impressive in the state and country, both Lachnicht and Niederhofer said.

Alachua County and the city of Gainesville take pride in their reputations as tree-loving communities, and a state legislator's proposal to dismantle local tree ordinances is not germinating well locally — or throughout the state.

Last week in Tallahassee during committee meetings to prepare for the 2018 Florida Legislative Session, Sen. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, introduced Senate Bill 574, which would cut down municipal tree ordinances that deal with “trimming, removal or harvesting of tree and timber on private property.” The proposed bill would nullify tree ordinances statewide, including those protecting Gainesville's iconic canopy roads.

“This proposed bill will allow the removal of any tree without having to plant another tree in its place,” said Meg Niederhofer, a local tree advocate who was the city of Gainesville's arborist from 1988 to 2010.

The city of Gainesville enacted its first tree ordinance in the late 1970s and Alachua County soon followed suit.

Tree ordinances like the ones on the books in Alachua County and Gainesville have several purposes, Neiderhofer said.

They protect open forest areas that help keep hurricanes from becoming as devastating as they otherwise might be, limit soil erosion, help reduce global warming, provide habitat for wildlife and protect the beauty of trees.

Ordinances enacted by local governments to protect trees are important because they reflect how much communities value trees, said Steve Lachnicht, director of the Alachua County Growth Management Department.

Placing a high value on protecting trees isn't unique to Alachua County, but this area is known for its tree-

protection efforts, Lachnicht said.

The Alachua County Tree Ordinance, adopted by the County Commission in 1991, protects trees with diameters of 8 inches or more or 2 feet in circumference, whichever is less; trees identified by federal and state forestry agencies as the largest of their species and trees that have a diameter of at least 30 inches or 7-feet, 10-inches, whichever is less.

In 2013, the city of Gainesville revised its tree protection ordinance to narrow the focus of the city's regulations to healthy heritage trees, a group of some 25 protected species, and levies a fee when those trees are removed from land being developed.

Officials in cities with tree ordinances, such as Jacksonville and Tallahassee, have already gone on record with their opposition to the proposed bill, and have been joined by 1,000 Friends of Florida, a statewide nonprofit that monitors land management and other issues, in opposing the bill.

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In recent years, the Legislature has thrown out local ordinances on drones, gas station signs, guns, marijuana dispensaries and ride-sharing. Steube makes a private property-rights argument for his move to pre-empt local rules that require government approval before clearing trees from a lot.

Steube told the Sarasota Herald-Tribune he was irked when he found out he had to pull a permit to clear a lot and then pay to have the debris removed when he built a three-car garage on in Sarasota County property.

Municipal tree ordinances that have short-term and long-term negative impacts on affordable housing should be evaluated, Sen. Keith Perry, R-Gainesville, said as he was headed to Tallahassee Monday afternoon.

"I haven't seen the proposed tree (law) in question, so I can't say if I support it or not," Perry said. "I've heard about it, and I will definitely be looking at it."

Both Lachnicht and Niederhofer said Steube's proposed bill is sure to receive a lot of opposition, especially locally.

"Our county is known for being a tree-loving county," Lachnicht said.

Niederhofer said this area not only protects trees, but insists that more be planted.

"Gainesville has led our state in developing regulations that require replanting when trees are removed," she said.