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## **Fine could fund trauma centers**

BYLINE: PAUL FLEMMING

TALLAHASSEE -- Fines for running a red light would almost double under a proposal unveiled Tuesday, the increase would be used to fund trauma centers throughout the state.

The increased fines would raise about \$14 million in its first year, a legislative study estimates. That's only a portion of what proponents say is the \$93 million it costs hospitals to keep the doors open all the time at 21 trauma centers.

Among them are Baptist, Sacred Heart and West Florida hospitals in Pensacola; Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne and Lee Memorial Hospital in Fort Myers.

"This funding crisis is real," said Rep. Holly Benson, R-Pensacola and chair of the House Health & Families Council. "Our trauma centers are having an emergency of their own."

If passed, the fine for running a red light would be \$125, up from \$65.

The increased money raised would be split among the state's trauma centers with a formula still being determined. Sen. Burt Saunders, R-Naples, and sponsor of the Senate version of the bill, said the division would be based on how much local taxes support each trauma center, the number of patients treated and the severity of their injuries.

Molly Nobels, a lobbyist for Pensacola's Baptist Hospital, said the funding is a start. "I think it's going to be: 'Anything's better than nothing,'" Nobels said.

Baptist, which operates one of three trauma centers in Pensacola, loses more than \$2.7 million a year on trauma care, said Bill Perkins, the hospital's director of finance. That's due in part to the costs associated with the minimum criteria required for staffing the 24-hour that costs \$3.4 million. In addition, the hospital eats unpaid bills from indigent care.

Keith Arnold, a lobbyist for Lee Memorial, said he didn't know how much the proposal would mean for the Fort Myers hospital. More important than the specific dollars, he said, is the principle of supporting trauma centers.

"It's just as important to receive the commitment," Arnold said. "The state has never funded this program. Any step to fund this vital program is good."

Lee Memorial covers its trauma center costs through a patchwork of sources. Among them is about \$4.5 million it gets from a Medicaid reimbursement boost program that Arnold says covers about half of its losses.

Attempts in the past two years to fund trauma centers have failed in the Legislature. Some opponents to the idea said the increased traffic fines proposed in the past were too high.

"This is not a tax increase, this is not a fee increase, this is a fine," said Rep. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando. "If you don't want to pay it, don't run a red light."