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Red-light runners, cash for sports lead wish list

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A request for a combined \$183 million to benefit NASCAR and the Orlando Magic is likely to divide Central Florida lawmakers this year over how much state money -- if any -- should be used to help professional sports. Most of the Central Florida delegation, though, is united behind an effort to stiffen the penalties for red-light runners after two young sisters were killed crossing an Orlando-area road four months ago.

Even as all 160 state lawmakers wrestle with major statewide issues such as Medicaid and education reform when the regular session begins Tuesday, the local delegation will have its own issues to grapple with. Tax money for sports franchises and the red-light running bill top that list.

"We in Florida are sort of caught in the proverbial problem of being between the dog and the fire hydrant," said Sen. Jim King, R-Jacksonville, whose district includes the Daytona International Speedway and who supports a \$75 million request to be used to lure the NASCAR Hall of Fame there. "If we don't play, we most assuredly lose the hall of fame. If we do play, we have to give in to those efforts of other people [requesting money for sports] and that brings up the question, 'When is enough, enough?'"

That question could threaten not only Daytona Beach's bid for the new stock-car racing attraction but also an Orlando attempt to garner up to \$108 million in state sales taxes that could go toward a new or renovated Magic arena.

Even more, both of those requests could become intertwined with South Florida's attempt at more than \$60 million to help build a new stadium for the Florida Marlins baseball team, a move that could force lawmakers to consider the general practice of subsidizing wealthy sports executives rather than weighing the separate proposals.

"That's a concern I have and hopefully we'll be able to work together to meet the needs of the Marlins as well as the Daytona area," said Rep. David Simmons, R-Longwood, who is sponsoring the Orlando arena proposal. "It makes good economic sense, so there's no reason not to do it."

King said he would oppose Simmons' arena bill, which does not have a sponsor in the Senate.

A spokesman for the Orlando Magic declined to comment on the bill.

NASCAR spokesman Jim Hunter said the selection of a hall of fame site -- for which at least five cities in five states are competing -- would rest, in part, on the financial package it is offered by the city of Daytona Beach.

"I would hope the legislators would look at each piece on an individual basis," Hunter said. "Obviously any time you get lumped in, you lower your odds."

Simmons says the bills should not be looked at as giveaways to sports teams, but as a significant boost of dollars into a community that could spur other economic development.

"We're not giving money to the Marlins or to the Magic," Simmons said. "We're transferring money to a local government for improvements. Boy, there's a big difference."

Red-light runners

While the sports facilities are getting mixed reviews, Rep. Andy Gardiner, who as House majority leader is Central Florida's highest-ranking member, said the bill to stop red-light runners is crucial to the Central Florida delegation's agenda this year.

"It's a No. 1 priority locally," he said.

Gardiner sponsored a similar measure last year, but it was stopped because former House Speaker Johnnie Byrd equated the increased fines to a new tax and blocked the bill.

This year's bill, sponsored by House freshman Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, would increase the fine for running red lights from \$60 to \$125 and would levy four points, instead of three, on the offender's driving record.

Ivan and Yamilka Velez, who lost their 5- and 2-year-old daughters when they were run over by a driver who ran a red light in October, have become the public faces of the bill. The two have already traveled to Tallahassee to testify in favor of the increased penalties.

"This kind of portrays a final destiny for my daughters," Ivan Velez said.

The increase in fines is expected to generate nearly \$19 million in additional revenue that would help pay for hospital trauma centers, according to a House analysis of the bill.

Though the extra fines faced opposition from some Republican leaders during the last two years, Cannon said he is optimistic that politics won't hold it up again this year.

The delegation also is poised to take on other issues, such as a refund of sales tax generated at the Orange County Convention Center, money for mental health programs and closing a tax loophole in Internet sales of hotel rooms.

Gardiner key this year

Gardiner could be Central Florida's strongest advocate this year in the role of House majority leader.

The region's delegation once held some of the most powerful seats in the state, with now Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings of Orlando serving two terms as Senate president, and Sen. Daniel Webster, R-Winter Garden and U.S. Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo serving recent terms as House speaker.

This year, though, lawmakers will fall back on Gardiner and the several lawmakers who hold key committee positions to drive their agenda.

Webster and Simmons are chairmen of the judiciary committees in the Senate and House, respectively, meaning they will be able to mold implementation of constitutional amendments and oversee several measures that will make it more difficult for residents to get initiatives on a ballot.

Rep. Frank Attkisson, R-Kissimmee, is chairman of the Business Regulation Committee, a position in which he'll have some control over a proposal for slot machines in South Florida.

"Even though we might not have the top prize of the speakership," Gardiner said. "I think we'll do quite well."

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