

Lee not reviving trauma tax plan

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Officials consider other options - for now

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Gov. Jeb Bush's veto cost the Lee Memorial Health System \$1 million for trauma next year, but officials said they don't plan to turn to Lee County taxpayers for help just yet.

Bush on Friday signed Senate Bill 1762, which originally provided \$22 million to be divided among the state's 20 trauma centers, with nearly \$2 million going to trauma research and a study of each center's needs.

The bill also allowed counties with less than 800,000 residents to seek from voters a local-option sales tax targeted specifically for trauma support.

Bush approved everything in the bill but \$20.7 million in payments to the state's trauma centers, saying more work needs to be done to determine what state money, if any, would be fair and equitable.

"Clearly, the legislation is well-intended, but the funding at this time is not justified," Bush wrote in an explanation Friday to Secretary Glenda Hood.

Bush acknowledged that some trauma centers are well-funded through local tax dollars and many hospitals with trauma centers are operating in the black. He said a study needs to be completed before any additional state money is considered.

The bill "hands \$1 million to each center without regard to financial need. If need is the reason, how can this approach be the answer?" Bush said.

Lee County's **trauma center** costs roughly \$10 million per year to operate, and a bundle of money from several sources will provide almost \$5 million next year, with Lee Memorial picking up the rest.

Because of that, Lee Memorial has no intention of asking voters to help foot the bill - this year, system President Jim Nathan said.

"That's about 50 percent of our economic shortfall, so we feel it is not the right time to go back to voters," he said. "Our game plan right now is we want to do our best to recruit and retain physicians, to show them we are moving in the right direction."

Lee Memorial is relying heavily on a federal-state Medicaid grant that netted the **trauma center** \$4.5 million this year and will again next year, coupled with a related annual state payment of \$450,000.

But the federal grant program - called Upper Payment Limit - is tenuous and no one knows whether it will be available after next year.

Whether Lee Memorial seeks up to 1[⁄]4 of a cent sales tax increase from voters relies largely on what happens next year in Tallahassee, said Keith Arnold, Lee Memorial's government consultant.

Arnold said he will continue to advocate for a bill next year patterned after Texas' recently passed legislation that increased fines for traffic citations, vehicle registrations and DUIs to raise at least \$250 million for trauma.

"The Legislature is very concerned about the spiraling costs of health care," he said. "We think the so-called Texas Plan makes logical sense and, hopefully, the governor and Legislature will embrace it next year."

San Carlos Park resident Mary Johnson said lawmakers must do something to keep the state's trauma centers funded and running.

Johnson said she is concerned that one major disaster could injure many.

"I think it is imperative for this state to take care of its trauma expectations," said Johnson, 84. "We have hurricanes that come and we have this terror alert all over the nation. It's imperative we protect our interests and have our doctors here to take care of people."

The Alliance to Save Florida's Trauma Care, a consortium of all 20 trauma centers, vows to work closely with the state to further the needs of Florida's struggling trauma centers.

The alliance said Friday that Bush's veto was not good public policy in penalizing the trauma centers that desperately need the money to stay open while they wait for the state to perform its study.

"We are very disappointed that the governor removed the appropriations portion," said Amy Maguire, the alliance's director. "We will continue to work with the governor and Florida's Legislature to find a solution to this crisis."