Tampa Bay Times: Florida lawmakers reveal their most robust agenda on flooding, sea-level rise

The proposed legislation marks a departure in Tallahassee after years of ignoring climate change.

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ST. PETERSBURG State lawmakers debuted on Friday what House Speaker Chris Sprowls called the "most robust agenda to mitigate flooding and sea-level rise that the State of Florida has ever seen."

Across multiple bills, the plan deemed "Always Ready" would create a hub for flood research and innovation at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, offer tax breaks to property owners who voluntarily raise their buildings and order the state to draw up a sea-level rise resilience plan.

Sprowls, R-Palm Harbor, said the lawmakers want to commit $100 million a year to address flooding and sea-level rise.

"While some continue to debate word choices, we re rolling up our sleeves and focusing on real problems that affect real business owners and real homeowners in our community," he said.

The proposals mark a departure for the Republican-led Legislature following years of top politicians in Tallahassee declining to take on the threats of climate change. Environmental advocates say the progress is limited.

One draft bill, led in the House by Rep. Demi Busatta Cabrera, R-Coral Gables, calls on the state to create a sea-level rise and flooding resilience plan by December 2021, with a three-year outlook for projects. By July 2023, the bill would require staffers under the Department of Environmental Protection to devise Florida s first-ever statewide flood vulnerability and sea-level rise assessment.

Busatta Cabrera said she wants to become "the world leader in flood mitigation."

"Sea-level rise doesn t care who you are or which ZIP code you live in, it affects all Floridians," she said. "It s time to ensure that future generations aren t left with nothing."

The policies would ask the state s chief science officer currently Thomas Frazer, who is also dean of the University of South Florida s College of Marine Science to coordinate with experts on developing standard sea-level rise projections. Frazer s college, meanwhile, would lead research efforts on future flooding, reporting each year to the governor s office and legislative leaders. Sen. Ray Rodrigues, R-Estero, is behind similar proposals in the Senate.

Rep. Linda Chaney, R-St. Pete Beach, and Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, are introducing the tax break legislation, which was recommended by Pinellas County Property Appraiser Mike Twitty. It would allow owners to voluntarily elevate their houses without the added value counting against them on property tax assessments.

During the news conference Friday, with a scenic backdrop of Bayboro Harbor along the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus, Sprowls and other leaders rolled through projections suggesting several Florida cities or counties are more at risk to flood losses than just about anywhere else in the country. They discussed billions of dollars of potential costs the state could incur from property damages, diminished home values and business closures after disasters.

The knock for years from resilience advocates has been that local governments and regional collaboratives are confronting the problems of climate change especially in South Florida without support from the Capitol.

"They really want to tackle this issue, but they desperately need support," said Alec Bogdanoff, Florida lead for the American Flood Coalition, who works with local governments and spoke alongside lawmakers Friday.

The push would direct more funding to regional vulnerability assessments and planning, as directed in Gov. Ron DeSantis proposed budget, which calls for $1 billion in bonds for resilience projects over several years.

Bogdanoff said the package "marks a new era in Florida."

Environmentalists, while happy to hear the words "sea-level rise" uttered openly in the Capitol, say lawmakers are focused on adaptation while ignoring fossil fuel emissions that are man-made contributors to warming and climate change. Florida is paying too much attention to consequences, they say, rather than causes.

"It is a good first step," said Yoca Arditi-Rocha, executive director of the advocacy group The CLEO Institute, in a statement. "But if we are not proposing solutions to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions driving rising sea levels and other extreme weather events, such as expansion of solar energy and storage, then our solutions will continue to be reactionary, not proactive."

During a question and answer period following the announcement, Getulio Gonzalez-Mulattieri, who said he represents a group called the Tampa Bay Disaster Resiliency Initiative, confronted Sprowls: "Unless you address the fossil fuel industry, nothing will change. You re just going to keep building higher and higher walls."

The Speaker rejected such criticism when asked how the Legislature will consider emissions.

"Too often, when we have conversations about flooding or we have conversations about the environment, we have some of our friends and respectfully, some of our friends in the press who want to engage in the hyper-politicization of the environment," he said. "It s all about words. I ve said all the words. What we re here to do is tackle real problems."

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