



Parker on Politics: Property tax break proposed for charities



Written by

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1:10 A.M. — State Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-Fort Myers, goes to his first legislative session next month, and has filed bills he'll push as prime sponsor.

His first bill? One that offers a 50 percent property tax break if the property is used for a charitable purpose.

Under law, nonprofits and charities get tax breaks only if the property is owned and used by the nonprofit. A church, for example, gets a break on the property it owns and uses. If it owns property it does not use, however, then it must pay full freight on the unused property.

Caldwell's bill would let the owner get a break if the property is simply used by a charity.

Caldwell said the bill was instigated by a friend who's interested in a recovery program for minor offenders leaving county

jail. Reduced rent costs for a location would be an obvious benefit, and providing that tax break could make it easier for property owners to find tenants — and possibly give the tenant a rent break because taxes would be lower, said Caldwell, who works as a property appraiser.

The bill, HB 275, does not yet have a staff analysis or economic impact. But Lee County Property Appraiser Ken Wilkinson said the change is major, and could have a significant financial impact.

Caldwell also has filed the "Andrew Widman bill," named for the Fort Myers police officer killed while on duty in July 2008.

The bill, which makes it easier for a judge to put a parolee back in jail, is now in its third year. The House approved the measure earlier, but it stalled in the Senate.

Caldwell said discussions on the wording

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should help bring approval this year.

Projects on table

Fort Myers Mayor Randy Henderson, speaking at Businesspeople United for Political Action this week, brought up several new projects on the drawing boards or in discussion stages for downtown Fort Myers, including:

- Talks with FGCU about getting “a graduate campus” or classes downtown, where there are thousands of daytime workers interested in degree advancement. Subjects he mentioned included public administration, art, history and science or biology — with the Caloosahatchee River serving as a living lab.
- Ongoing discussions with the Columbia Restaurant, which would provide a special destination eatery not found elsewhere in Lee County.
- A new, state-of-the-art fire station on the site of the Fort Myers-Lee County library, after the new library is built several blocks away.
- A swim center at the City of Palms Park is worthy of consideration.

The City Council also is working on regulations to gain further control over the use of golf carts, especially in the McGregor Boulevard corridor, he said.

State law prohibits their use on public streets, but city police were willing to

overlook the issue, Henderson said — until recently, when complaints escalated about lawn damage, reckless operation and children driving.

“They’ve caused so much aggravation the police have been forced to step up their enforcement,” Henderson said, noting regulations to gain more control “will have to involve a delicate balance.”

Reorganizing plan

State Rep. Gary Aubuchon, R-Cape Coral, has another special legislative assignment: He’s been named vice chairman of the new Select Committee on Government Reorganization. House Speaker Dean Cannon announced the appointment and committee this week, with Rep. John Legg, R-Port Richey, as chairman.

Aubuchon serves as Rule Chairman for the House.

He and Legg “are well known for their work

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ethic, seriousness of purpose and skill in handling complex public policy," Cannon said in his announcement.

Select committees are usually set up for short periods, perhaps two years, to study a specific topic — in this case, government programs that promote or regulate private economic development, and government programs involved with providing health and human services. The committee may then develop bills or ballot initiatives.

Other committee members will be chosen later.

GOP celebrates

Celebrating a milestone for any Southwest Florida political organization, the Lee Republican Women Federated plans its 25th anniversary party Friday.

All members and elected officials are invited, along with past club officers and other friends and guests. So far more than 80 people will attend, including county commissioners John Manning and Ray Judah, Property Appraiser Ken Wilkinson, State Attorney Steve Russell, Public Defender Kathy Smith, Sheriff Mike Scott and Elections Supervisor Sharon Harrington.

The organization also has received several congratulatory letters and proclamations from state and federal officials, and U.S. Rep. Connie Mack IV, R-Fort Myers, sent a flag that's flown over the Capitol.

The event lasts from 6-8 p.m. at The Veranda in downtown Fort Myers.

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