

Galvano: Stay in the fast lane

THE BUZZ

ON FLORIDA'S POLITICS

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Senate President Bill Galvano defended the tight timelines for creating more than 300 miles of toll roads, saying the Department of Transportation's five-year plan was 'not realistic.' 'The days of relying on a five-year plan are just, they're not realistic in modern Florida, a Florida that's the 14th largest economy on the planet,' Galvano, R-Bradenton, said Tuesday.

Galvano was the main proponent for the road projects, which would extend the Suncoast Parkway to the Georgia border, extend Florida's Turnpike to the Suncoast and build a new road linking Polk to Collier counties. The three roads, if built, would be the largest expansion of toll roads in more than 50 years.

The Legislature passed the bill this year, even though transportation officials did not have the roads in its five-year plan, which the department uses to guide its long-term planning process.

The bill the Legislature passed gave extraordinarily tight timelines for the projects, however. Three task forces, one of each road, have until October to issue its recommendations to the governor and Legislature. Construction would start in 2022 and the roads would be built by 2030.

The deadlines leave little to no time for task force members to vet the projects, and some of them have complained about the persistent

'These corridors need to exist,' Galvano said.

But giving politicians, instead of transportation department engineers, direction over future road projects brought back memories of the 'Pork Chop Gang,' the group of politicians that controlled the Legislature during the first half of the 20th century.

Galvano said he isn't proposing doing away with the transportation department's five-year planning process, and that the department will ultimately decide whether the roads will be built.

'It is still within the province of the agency, with the assistance of the task force, to ultimately make these decisions,' Galvano said.

CFO blames public adjusters, lawyers

Florida Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis blamed public adjusters and lawyers for Hurricane Michael claim delays, proposing a law giving Floridians more time to break their contracts with adjusters.

But while he acknowledged that insurance companies shoulder some of the blame for dragging out claims, he did not announce any proposals to hold insurance companies accountable.

Public adjusters are licensed by the state and can be hired to represent policyholders during an insurance claim.

'I've seen PAs that sign people, and then they sit back there on Facebook all day long, because they know that they have got an airtight contract, and they will leave you twisting in the wind,' Patronis said Tuesday.

the claim, while Panhandle residents and his own Insurance Consumer Advocate have laid the fault with insurance companies.

'Insurance consumers are very frustrated with their insurance companies,' Insurance Consumer Advocate Tasha Carter told lawmakers last month. 'They're frustrated that their claims have not been closed and that they have not been handled appropriately.' When Patronis recently asked on his Facebook page what people needed to recover from the storm, two dozen people asked to hold insurance companies accountable. Of the more than 100 comments, no one complained about public adjusters.

Patronis on Tuesday acknowledged that insurance companies have been slow to pay claims, citing the example of someone who had to wait 10 months to get a claim paid at its full policy limit.

'Why does it take 10 months to get a full policy limit check cut?' he said. 'You'd think that is something that could be cut in the first two weeks.' But he implied that lawyers, public adjusters and unscrupulous contractors shared an equal amount of the blame.

'Challenges by the insurance carriers, challenges of the PAs, challenges of attorneys, unscrupulous contractors, all those factored into it,' Patronis said. 'I want to hold everybody accountable, but as I have seen, the public adjusters take advantage.' He said he would 'love' to have data showing that public adjusters are to blame, but it doesn't exist. The Office of Insurance Regulation, which has asked insurance companies for additional data to learn why the claims have taken so

lack of details so far. Transportation officials have provided no data on whether the roads are needed.

'We need to talk about the demand for people to pay tolls, right? What is projected revenue and what are projected costs?' task force member Thomas Hawkins, a land planner and University of Florida program director, said last month. 'I don't see it anywhere on this sheet. That's a problem.' Galvano said Tuesday that the need for the projects is apparent with the state's growing population: 900 new people moving to Florida on average each day, plus 175 million tourists last year.

He said state law should be amended so policyholders can back out of a contract with an adjuster within 30 days of a state emergency, instead of three days currently.

'That's a huge step forward in empowering Floridians to take charge of their insurance claims,' Patronis said.

Patronis echoed talking points made by the insurance industry, which has blamed public adjusters for carriers' struggle to quickly pay claims following the Category 5 Hurricane Michael.

Nearly 12 percent of claims still were open as of last month, nearly a year after the storm made landfall. That's far worse than 2017's Hurricane Irma, which saw only 9 percent of claims open nine months after the storm.

But neither the insurance industry nor Patronis has presented data supporting

long to be paid, did not ask insurance companies for data on public adjusters.