

Changes to growth law bring \$1.5-billion to tame sprawl

Bush signs a bill that provides money for such things as schools, roads and water systems.

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In the midst of Tampa Bay's suburban sprawl, Gov. Jeb Bush on Friday signed the biggest changes to Florida's growth management law in two decades.

Bush went to the bumper-to-bumper suburb of Brandon to place his signature on a bill that provides \$1.5-billion to build schools, roads and water systems and requires roads and schools to be in place within three years of a project's approval by local government.

"It's clear as day," Bush said at a ceremony at the Brandon Chamber of Commerce. "If we do not invest in protecting water, building roads, providing adequate education in enough schools, our growth will change and alter, and it will deteriorate, and people won't be able to pursue their dreams."

Slow-growth advocates say the bill not only won't stop sprawl, it may actually increase it by adding new asphalt to congested roads.

"It's a small baby step forward," said Denise Layne of Lutz, who formed the Coalition 4 Responsible Growth earlier this year to look for practical, nonpartisan solutions to Florida's chronic growth problems. "This is a first step in the right direction, and I applaud them for that."

The \$1.5-billion investment is for the first year, with \$750-million allocated in later years. Much of that money will be spent on the state's most congested roads, such as U.S. 19 and the bay area's interstate highways.

Bush signed the growth bill and two related measures in the hometown of Senate President Tom Lee, a Republican from Brandon and a home builder who made growth management the major issue on his legislative agenda.

"We don't really have an opportunity all that often to get together on something this substantial," Lee said. Lee did not get everything he wanted on growth management. He wanted to make it easier for counties to increase local sales and gas taxes without voter approval, and funnel the money to highly developed areas to reduce sprawl.

But the more conservative House opposed that proposal, calling it a backdoor tax increase.

Bush signed two other bills that seek to improve coordination on water policy between local governments and water management districts and provide \$200-million to clean up polluted waterways and provide money for alternative water supplies, such as water reuse and desalination plants.

"I'm so excited to see an entire growth management package, one that deals with infrastructure, one that deals with planning ahead and one that actually puts our money where our mouth is," said Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland.

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