

## HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

**BILL #:** PCB CVJS 11-03 Terms of Court

**SPONSOR(S):** Civil Justice Subcommittee

**TIED BILLS:** None **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** None

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
Orig. Comm.: Civil Justice Subcommittee		Bond	Bond

### SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Terms of court were enacted to ensure that the circuit judges traveled to each of the counties on a regular basis. While terms of court were a necessity in the days of difficult travel and slow communications, the concept is long outdated and unnecessary.

This proposed committee bill repeals statutory requirements for terms of court and makes conforming changes.

This proposed committee bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on state or local governments.

## FULL ANALYSIS

### I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

#### A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

##### Background

At one time, circuit court judges literally "rode the circuit," travelling from one county seat to the next for the purpose of conducting court. In a day of difficult travel and slow communications, it was important that the circuit judge show up on a date certain to conduct the court's business.<sup>1</sup> Terms of court were developed to fill that need, and were required by the state constitution<sup>2</sup> until Article V was substantially rewritten in 1957. Current law creates two or more terms of court in each of the counties. See ss. 26.22-.365, F.S.

In the past, on the first day of the term of court the circuit judge would conduct a ceremonial opening of the term of court, the clerk would summons a new grand jury, the sheriff would bring in the prisoners for a docket sounding, and the work of the circuit court would commence. The circuit judge was generally expected to stay in town until the judicial work was complete, but also was required to leave in time to make it to the next county for start of that county's term of court. A circuit judge is fined \$50 a day for every day he or she is late starting a term of court.<sup>3</sup>

In the early days of the state, work as a supreme court justice was a part-time occupation. The justices similarly held terms of court in order that they have a fixed time to travel to Tallahassee to conduct appellate sessions. The concept for terms of court was adopted when the intermediate district courts of appeal were created in 1957. Section 35.11, F.S., requires each of the district courts of appeal to meet at least once in every regular term in each judicial circuit within the district.

Today, terms of court are an archaic concept. It does not appear that any of the courts formally open a term of court with the traditional ceremony. Circuit judges come and go from each of the counties as needed and far more often than once every six months. Only one of the five district courts of appeal is known to regularly travel the district for the purpose of conducting oral argument. Nobody knows when the last time a circuit judge was fined for nonappearance at the first day of a term.

Terms of court are still used for two purposes: designating the terms of grand juries and limiting withdrawal of an appellate mandate.

Historically, although not explicitly required by statute, the terms of a grand jury coincide with the term of the court.

In the appellate courts, the terms of court limit an appellate court's ability to withdraw a mandate, a rare procedure. The Florida Supreme Court in 1932 explained the scope and limits of the power to withdraw:

But, be that as it may, a majority of the court have reached the conclusion that the correct rule, which should be recognized and applied in such situation, is that the jurisdiction of this court, like the jurisdiction of courts generally, persists to the end of the term, and then terminates, but that, during the term at which a judgment of this court is rendered, this court has jurisdiction and power which it may exercise, as the circumstances and justice of the case may require, to reconsider, revise, reform, or

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.leoncountyfl.gov/2ndcircuit/index.php?Page=FirstHundred.php>, which describes the history of the Second Judicial Circuit, including how the terms of court provided for the circuit judge to travel down the Apalachicola River, and were changed to accommodate the arrival of steamboat service along the river. (last accessed February 14, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Article V s. 8 of the Constitution of 1885 included this sentence: " Such Judge shall hold at least two terms of his court in each county within his Circuit every year, at such times and places as shall be prescribed by law, and may hold special terms."

<sup>3</sup> Section 26.39, F.S.

modify its own judgments for the purpose of making the same accord with law and justice, and that it has power to recall its own mandate for the purpose of enabling it to exercise such jurisdiction and power in a proper case.<sup>4</sup>

Under current law, a mandate may only be withdrawn during the current term of the appellate court, which leads to the odd result of some appellate court opinions being subject to withdrawal for nearly six months while others may only be subject to withdrawal for a few days.

### Effect of Bill

This PCB repeals statutory terms of court applicable to the circuit courts, district courts of appeal, and Supreme Court. This PCB also makes the following conforming changes:

- Repeals the fine for nonattendance by a circuit judge.
- Repeals a requirement that a circuit judge call the docket at the end of the term.
- Repeals a requirement that district courts of appeal hear oral arguments in each of the judicial circuits in every term of court.
- Repeals a requirement that criminal cases be heard in the term before civil cases.
- Repeals a requirement that a criminal case be heard in the same term of court that the indictment was handed down unless the court holds the case to the next term for good cause.
- Removes references to terms of court in statutes regarding county sheriffs.
- Removes references to terms of court in the definitions of two crimes.
- Removes the requirement that a criminal defendant show up on the first day of a term of court if the appearance bond is unclear.
- Requires the chief judge of the circuit to set the terms of a grand jury.
- Removes reference to terms of court in a statute requiring a witness in a criminal case to appear in court.

This PCB creates two new conforming statutes. Those new sections:

- Allow the Supreme Court to establish terms of court for the Supreme Court and for the lower courts, if the court wishes.
- Provides in statute that an appellate court may withdraw a mandate for up to 120 days after it is filed with the lower court. The conditions upon which withdrawal is allowed are taken from case law.

### B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 repeals ss. 25.051, 26.21, 26.22, 26.23, 26.24, 26.25, 26.26, 26.27, 26.28, 26.29, 26.30, 26.31, 26.32, 26.33, 26.34, 26.35, 26.36, 26.361, 26.362, 26.363, 26.364, 26.365, 26.37, 26.38, 26.39, 26.40, 26.42, 35.10, 35.11, 907.05 and 907.055, F.S.

Section 2 amends s. 26.46, F.S., regarding jurisdiction of a resident judge.

Section 3 amends s. 30.12, F.S., regarding the power to appoint a sheriff.

Section 4 amends s. 30.15, F.S., regarding powers, duties and obligations of the sheriff.

Section 5 creates s. 43.43, F.S., regarding terms of court.

Section 6 creates s. 43.44, F.S., regarding mandates of appellate courts.

Section 7 amends s. 831.17, F.S., regarding offenses.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Chapman v. St. Stephens Protestant Episcopal Church, Inc.*, 138 So. 630 (Fla. 1932). The *Chapman* case specifically provides that the power to withdraw a mandate may be limited by statute.

Section 8 amends s. 877.08, F.S., regarding coin-operated machines.

Section 9 amends s. 903.32, F.S., regarding defects in a criminal bond.

Section 10 amends s. 905.01, F.S., regarding grand jury terms.

Section 11 amends s. 905.09, F.S., regarding discharge of a grand jury.

Section 12 amends s. 905.095, F.S., regarding extension of a grand jury term.

Section 13 amend s. 914.03, F.S., regarding attendance of witnesses.

Section 14 provides an effective date of January 1, 2012.

## **II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT**

### **A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:**

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

### **B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:**

1. Revenues:

None.

2. Expenditures:

None.

### **C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:**

None.

### **D. FISCAL COMMENTS:**

None.

## **III. COMMENTS**

### **A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:**

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

This bill does not appear to require counties or municipalities to take an action requiring the expenditure of funds, reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenue in the aggregate, nor reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

None.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

**IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES**

n/a