

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: HB 7 Pub. Rec./Claim Settlement on Behalf of Minor or Ward

SPONSOR(S): Passidomo

TIED BILLS: HB 5 **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 360

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
1) Civil Justice Subcommittee	13 Y, 0 N	Robinson	Bond
2) Government Operations Subcommittee		Williamson	Williamson
3) Judiciary Committee			

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Litigation settlement agreements in guardianship cases routinely include a provision that the terms will be held in confidence by all parties. Because an adult may settle a lawsuit without court approval, those confidentiality clauses are effective and enforceable. However, a minor cannot settle a case valued in excess of \$15,000 without court approval. The court approval process requires a petition setting forth the terms of the settlement. An order is eventually entered that may also contain the terms of settlement, or may refer to the petition. The petition and the order are part of a court file, and therefore are a matter of public record and open for inspection under current law.

The bill amends the guardianship law to provide that the petition requesting permission for settlement of a claim, the order on the petition, and any document associated with the settlement, are confidential and exempt from public records requirements. The court may order partial or full disclosure of the confidential and exempt record upon a showing of good cause.

The bill provides a statement of public necessity as required by the State Constitution.

The bill provides that the exemption will take effect on the same date as House Bill 5 or similar legislation if such legislation is adopted in the same legislative session, or an extension thereof, and becomes law.

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution, requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage of a newly created or expanded public record or public meeting exemption. The bill expands the current public record exemption for certain information related to guardianship; thus, it requires a two-thirds vote for final passage.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Background

Public Records Law - In General

Article I, s. 24(a) of the State Constitution sets forth the state's public policy regarding access to government records. This section guarantees every person a right to inspect or copy any public record of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. The Legislature, however, may provide by general law for the exemption of records from the requirements of Article I, s. 24(a) of the State Constitution. The general law must state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption (public necessity statement) and must be no broader than necessary to accomplish its purpose.¹

Court Records

Florida courts have consistently held that the judiciary is not an "agency" for purposes of Ch. 119, F.S.² However, the Florida Supreme Court found that "both civil and criminal proceedings in Florida are public events" and that the court will "adhere to the well-established common law right of access to court proceedings and records."³ There is a Florida constitutional guarantee of access to judicial records.⁴ The constitutional provision provides for public access to judicial records, except for those records expressly exempted by the State Constitution, Florida law in effect on July 1, 1993, court rules in effect on November 3, 1992, or by future acts of the Legislature in accordance with the State Constitution.⁵

Exempt versus Confidential and Exempt

There is a difference between records the Legislature has determined to be exempt and those which have been determined to be confidential and exempt.⁶ If the Legislature has determined the information to be confidential then the information is not subject to inspection by the public.⁷ Also, if the information is deemed to be confidential it may only be released to those person and entities designated in statute.⁸ However, the agency is not prohibited from disclosing the records in all circumstances where the records are deemed only exempt.⁹

Settlements in Guardianship Cases

Litigation settlement agreements routinely include a provision that the terms will be held in confidence by all parties. Because an adult may settle a lawsuit without court approval, those confidentiality clauses are effective and enforceable. However, a minor cannot settle a case valued in excess of \$15,000 without court approval.¹⁰ The court approval process requires a petition setting forth the terms of the settlement.¹¹ An order is eventually entered that also may contain the terms of settlement, or may refer to the petition.¹² The petition and the order are part of a court file, and therefore, are a matter of public record and open for inspection under current law.

¹ Art I., s. 24(c), Fla. Const.

² See e.g., *Times Publishing Company v. Ake*, 660 So.2d 255 (Fla. 1995).

³ *Barron v. Florida Freedom Newspapers*, 531 So.2d 113, 116 (Fla. 1988).

⁴ Art I., s. 24(a), Fla. Const.

⁵ Art I., ss. 24(c) and (d), Fla. Const.

⁶ *WFTV, Inc. v. School Board of Seminole County*, 874 So.2d 48, 53 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004), *review denied*, 892 So.2d 1015 (Fla. 2004).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See *Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So.2d 683, 687 (Fla. 5th DCA), *review denied*, 589 So.2d 289 (Fla. 1991).

¹⁰ See s. 744.301(2), F.S.

¹¹ Section 744.387, F.S.

¹² *Id.*

Effect of the Bill

The bill amends s. 744.3701, F.S., to provide that any court record relating to the settlement of a ward's or minor's claim, including a petition for approval of a settlement on behalf of a ward or minor, a report of a guardian ad litem relating to a pending settlement, or an order approving a settlement on behalf of a ward or minor, is confidential and exempt from the provisions of s. 119.07(1), F.S., and s. 24(a), Art. I of the State Constitution and may not be disclosed except as specifically authorized.

Because the record is made confidential and exempt, it may not be disclosed except as provided in law. Current law allows the court, the clerk of court, the guardian and the guardian's attorney to review the guardianship court file. The bill amends s. 744.3701, F.S., to provide that record of a settlement may also be disclosed to the guardian ad litem (if any) related to the settlement, to the ward (the minor) if he or she is 14 years of age or older and has not been declared incompetent, and to the attorney for the ward. The record may also be disclosed as ordered by the court.

The bill includes a public necessity statement.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 amends s. 744.3701, F.S., regarding confidentiality.

Section 2 provides a public necessity statement.

Section 3 provides for an effective date to coincide with passage of House Bill 5, if adopted in the same legislative session.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on state revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on state expenditures.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on local government revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on local government expenditures.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

The bill does not appear to have any direct economic impact on the private sector.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

Like any other public records exemption, the bill may lead to a minimal fiscal impact on the affected portions of the government, in this case, the court system and clerks of court. Staff responsible for complying with public record requests could require training related to expansion of the public record exemption, and court and clerk offices could incur costs associated with redacting the confidential and exempt information prior to releasing a record. The costs, however, would be absorbed, as they are part of the day-to-day responsibilities of the court system and clerks.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

The 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:

Vote Requirement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage of a newly created or expanded public record or public meeting exemption. The bill expands a public record exemption related to guardianships; thus, it requires a two-thirds vote for final passage.

Public Necessity Statement

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a public necessity statement for a newly created or expanded public record or public meeting exemption. The bill expands a public record exemption related to guardianships; thus, it includes a public necessity statement.

Breadth of Exemption

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a newly created public record or public meeting exemption to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The bill expands a public record exemption related to guardianships to include a court record relating to the settlement of a ward's or minor's claim.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

The bill does not appear to create a need for executive branch rulemaking or rulemaking authority.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

Other Comments: Public Necessity Statement

The bill expands a public record exemption related to guardianships to include court records relating to the settlement of a ward's or minor's claim. However, the introductory sentence to the public necessity statement (section 2) addresses the need to protect information contained in the court record that could be used to identify a minor or ward. As such, it is unclear whether the intent is to protect the entire court record or identifying information contained therein.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

None.