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## Bennett bill aims to block crash fee

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MANATEE — State Sen. Mike Bennett has introduced a bill that would prevent local governments, like Bradenton's, from seeking reimbursement for the expense of public safety departments responding to accidents.

"I have a real problem with allowing local governments charging for services that I feel should be paid with the local property tax," Bennett said Tuesday.

A number of Florida municipalities and counties, including Ocala and Escambia County, have begun charging recovery fees of the insurance companies of drivers who were found to be at-fault in an accident where police and fire services were needed.

Bennett, R-Bradenton, said the trend is about finding a new money source in these times of reduced tax revenue.

"I know that local governments have had out-of-control spending in the past," and are now looking to make up some of the lost revenue, he said.

In an e-mail message, Nicholas Halliwell, the senior communications consultant for Allstate Insurance Co. in St. Petersburg, called the fees a hidden tax.

"Consumers already pay for these services in the form of taxes," Halliwell said. "Shifting the expense for these services to insurers could inevitably lead to higher rates, which is not a very good idea given the current economic times."

Bennett's bill, SB 2282, and the House companion bill, HB 1043, would prohibit local governments from imposing a tax, charging a fee, or seeking reimbursement "for services provided by first responders . . . except when services provided to an insured are expressly covered by an insurance company."

The Bradenton City Council has recently had a representative of a company that collects recovery fees for governments give a presentation on how the process works.

Regina Moore, president of Cost Recovery Corp. of Dayton, Ohio, told council members at a work session last week, the city could recoup about \$100,000 of the \$300,000 it spends each year for police and fire personnel to respond to accidents.

In a telephone interview Tuesday, Moore said charging service fees for public safety departments to direct traffic, clean up and write reports alleviates the cost to taxpayers.

"We have people paying their auto insurance and taxes," she said, "and not causing accidents.

"This makes the negligent driver pay for the accident," Moore said. "It's like restitution."

After Moore's presentation last week, the council decided to gather more information before moving ahead with the proposal.

"We need to hear from the citizens," Councilwoman Marianne Barnebey said Tuesday. "The citizens are requiring government to look at every aspect of spending."

Councilman Gene Gallo said he does not think the council should proceed with a cost recovery plan until they see what the state Legislature does.

"If it's going to be counter-productive to do something," Gallo said, "then we should take a wait-and-see approach."

State Rep. Ron Reagan, R-Bradenton, whose district includes portions of Manatee County, said he was not sure if he was going to support the legislation.

"I'm torn," said Reagan, who also is an insurance agent, "We already pay taxes for fire and police.

"Part of me says it doesn't make sense to pay again," he said, "but another part says if I'm not using the service, why should I pay extra?"

Reagan said he will decide how he would vote when he hears the arguments from both sides in a committee hearing.