

BEACHES

## Sen. Nelson withdraws support for federal bill to allow private ownership of local beaches

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U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson has pulled his support for a bill to allow private ownership of land on Pensacola and Navarre beaches.

Nelson's office said Monday that the legislation could jeopardize military training on miles of nearby military-owned beaches because it does not prohibit Santa Rosa County from cutting a pass from Santa Rosa Sound through Navarre Beach for fast access to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The Air Force has made it clear that reopening Navarre Pass would interfere with its testing and training missions. The legislation filed earlier this year doesn't go far enough to prevent future cutting of the pass," Nelson's office said in an emailed statement.

Florida's Democratic senator is no longer listed as a cosponsor of the legislation, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives earlier this year.

U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, R- Fort Walton Beach, who drafted the legislation and sponsored the bill in the House, said Nelson told him that he plans to draft his own version of the bill.

"I await its filing and I look forward to a bipartisan resolution of this issue," Gaetz said in a text message early Monday.

Gaetz has said that the support of both of Florida's U.S. senators would likely be needed for the bill to advance. U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Florida, is still listed as a cosponsor of the legislation.

**More:** Gaetz says he's working with Nelson to adjust beach ownership bill

Opponents of the Gaetz bill called Nelson's decision to pull his support a victory.

"We are ecstatic," said Vickie Neapolitan-Scott of the group Indivisible Northwest Florida, which has fought against the legislation. "We feel good that he has come to the right conclusion about conservation protections."

Indivisible Northwest Florida wants local voters, not Congress, to decide whether beach leaseholders should be given titles their properties. The group is pushing for a county-wide referendum on the issue.

Gaetz' bill would overturn a 1946 agreement that deeded much of Santa Rosa Island to Escambia County. The agreement stated that the county could not sell the beach land and must use it "for such purposes as it shall deem to be in the public interest."

In the 1950s, county leaders decided the greatest benefit to the general public would be to develop the land and draw tourism revenue. Because county leaders were prohibited from selling the land, they created a series of 99-year lease agreements and established the Santa Rosa Island Authority to oversee the leases.

To lure residential and commercial development, the authority placed advertisements in national publications and touted investments in beachfront properties that would come without property taxes because of the lease system.

After the island was heavily developed, the county turned to beach leaseholders as a source of tax revenue and began assessing property taxes on the leased land. That decision led to a series of lawsuits, which continue today. In the many lawsuits, leaseholders claim they should not be assessed property taxes on land they do not own.

Advocates of the Gaetz bill argue that it is the simplest way to get rid of the complicated lease system and ensure a steady property tax revenue stream from the beach. Opponents argue it could open the door to more widespread development of local beaches and that it amounts to a giveaway of public land.

### **More:** Sen. Nelson rethinks support for private beach ownership bill

While the bill contains language aimed at keeping conservation areas of Pensacola Beach undeveloped, it does not contain similar language for Navarre Beach. Santa Rosa County controls Navarre Beach development because of a long-term lease agreement with Escambia County. Santa Rosa County leaders have opposed changing the bill.

Santa Rosa County leaders also oppose any language in the bill that would prevent them from cutting a short pass through the narrow barrier island for fast boat access to the Gulf of Mexico.

Neapolitan-Scott said she believes it is unlikely Nelson can draft compromise legislation that Santa Rosa County would support.

"It seems there are irreconcilable differences between what Santa Rosa County wants and what Nelson wants. I don't think (Nelson's) efforts will get much traction locally," she said.

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