

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS - Revised

BILL #: HB 341 CS Wrecker Services
SPONSOR(S): Robaina
TIED BILLS: **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 276 (s)

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR
1) <u>Transportation Committee</u>	<u>14 Y, 0 N, w/CS</u>	<u>Pugh</u>	<u>Miller</u>
2) <u>Agriculture Committee</u>	_____	_____	_____
3) <u>Criminal Justice Committee</u>	_____	_____	_____
4) <u>Agriculture & Environment Appropriations Committee</u>	_____	_____	_____
5) <u>State Infrastructure Council</u>	_____	_____	_____

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

An estimated 1,200 to 1,500 companies operate wrecker businesses, and more than 7,000 trucks are registered as wreckers with the state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV). The wrecker industry is regulated by the state in the following areas: vehicle registration and liability insurance requirements; procedures related to vehicle owner/operator notification and the assessment of liens on towed vehicles; and establishment of wrecker call lists by law enforcement agencies. Some local governments require wrecker companies to obtain occupational licenses.

HB 341 w/CS creates a new chapter of law devoted to wrecker operator regulation. The proposed chapter 508, Florida Statutes (F.S.), would:

- o Require annual registration of wrecker companies with the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS), and establish criteria by which registration would be denied.
- o Require certification and continuing education of tow-truck operators.
- o Create a seven-member Wrecker Operator Advisory Council that would approve curricula for the certification and continuing education courses in Florida; determine if out-of-state wrecker certification courses are substantially equivalent to Florida courses; and approve standards for specialized wrecker service certification.
- o Direct DACS, in consultation with the council, to issue rules implementing the new requirements.
- o List a number of prohibited acts which could cost a wrecker operator its registration and a driver his or her certification card.
- o Establish an annual registration fee of \$495.
- o Specify that unregistered wrecker companies could not be on the wrecker allocation lists, used by law enforcement officers to call tow trucks to the scene of accidents or other occasions to remove vehicles or vessels.
- o Exempts businesses which derive at least 80 percent of gross sales from repairs to motor vehicles; licensed automobile dealers from the regulatory provisions; and businesses that regularly tow mobile homes.

The bill also specifies that tow trucks shall be required to have only one tag, to be placed on the front of the vehicles; clarifies that vessels parked on real property without permission also may be towed and held for lien; and creates a section of law on liens for towed, recovered, and stored mobile homes.

HB 341w/CS does not alter the authority of local governments to set maximum rates for towing, but does prohibit counties and municipalities from issuing or renewing occupational licenses for wrecker companies that have not registered with DACS. It also specifies that wrecker operators can accept checks and credit cards, as well as cash, from the owners or operators of the towed vehicles to pay towing and storage charges.

DACS estimates expenditures of \$731,040 in the first year of implementation, and estimates that the \$495 fee will generate \$693,000 in recurring revenue. The bill also authorizes 10 additional FTEs to DACS for the purposes of implementing the act, and appropriates \$693,000 to fund implementation. If the estimates are accurate, DACS will have to fund the apparent revenue shortfall from other agency resources.

Most of the changes in HB 341w/CS go into effect July 1, 2005, but some provisions become effective January 1, 2006.

This document does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill sponsor or House of Representatives.

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FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. HOUSE PRINCIPLES ANALYSIS:

Provide limited government: HB 341 w/CS authorizes the creation of the Wrecker Operator Advisory Council within DACS to assist the agency with the technical aspects of regulating the towing industry. The Council also is charged with approving curricula for certification and continuing education programs, and to determine if out-of-state wrecker certification courses are substantially equivalent to Florida courses. Also, DACS is given 10 FTEs and additional rulemaking authority to implement the bill's provisions.

Ensure lower taxes: HB 341 w/CS creates a \$495 annual registration fee for most wrecker companies in the state of Florida. This fee, however, is recommended by one wrecker industry group.

Safeguard individual liberty: HB 341 w/CS requires most wrecker companies to register to continue in business; requires most wrecker operators to undergo training and continuing education to be certified and thus continue in employment; and requires owners and executive managers of most wrecker companies to be fingerprinted and undergo criminal background checks.

B. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Operational regulation of the wrecker industry

Present Situation

Currently, the primary business regulations on the wrecker industry are proper registration of vehicles, as described in chapter 320, F.S., and liability insurance coverage in s. 324.021 and s. 627.7415, F.S. In addition, many local governments require wrecker companies to obtain occupational licenses, pursuant to chapter 205, F.S.

Over the years, concerns have increased over so-called "gypsy wreckers" operating without liability insurance and whose vehicles are improperly registered and ill-equipped to tow vehicles, and who prey on stranded motorists, tourists, and motorists who illegally park their vehicles.

Effect of Proposed Changes

HB 341 w/CS creates chapter 508, F.S. – Wrecker Services, which is section 16 of the bill. It creates a comprehensive structure for the registration of wrecker companies and the certification and continuing education of wrecker operators, the persons who drive the tow trucks, and establishes penalties. These regulatory responsibilities are assigned to DACS, which would be assisted by a new seven-member Wrecker Operator Advisory Council.

Under the bill, with some exceptions all wrecker companies must be registered in Florida. Annual registration is a prerequisite for obtaining a local occupational license and for participating in the wrecker allocation call programs.

Exempt from these requirements would be: persons regularly engaged in the business of transporting mobile homes; motor vehicle repair shops deriving 80 percent of their business from repairs; franchised motor vehicle dealers; recovery or repossession agents; and any person performing wrecker services on behalf of a religious organization that holds a current exemption from federal taxation, or that is not required to apply for recognition of its exemption under the Internal Revenue Code.

Role of the Wrecker Operator Advisory Council

The bill creates a Wrecker Operator Advisory Council (Council) within DACS. The Council consists of 7 members who must be Florida residents: 6 appointed by the Commissioner of Agriculture and the seventh being the Executive Director of the Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida as an ex-officio

but voting member. Three of the Commissioner's appointees must have been ultimate equitable owners of a wrecker company for at least 5 years; one must be a wrecker operator with at least five years of experience; and two are lay persons. Of the initial appointees, two wrecker company owners and one lay person would serve 2-year terms and the rest 4-year terms; all subsequent appointees would serve 4-year terms. By the year 2011, the industry appointees also must meet the registration or certification requirements. The Council would select its chair and vice chair, and all members would serve without compensation except for travel reimbursement and per diem pursuant to s. 112.061, F.S.

The Council will have significant authority. It will:

- o Approve the certification courses for wrecker operators, prescribe the curricula, and approve each organization proposing to offer the courses.
- o Approve the instruction, training, and examination for specialized wrecker services before they can be endorsed for a wrecker certification.
- o Approve certification training in other states for the purposes of substitution, and determine whether such training is substantially equivalent to Florida's approved wrecker-operator courses
- o Review the rules promulgated by DACS to implement chapter 508, F.S., and advise the agency on wrecker industry standards, practices and other matters requiring technical expertise.

DACS role

DACS has the responsibility to manage and enforce the wrecker company registration and wrecker operator certification programs. The agency has both general and specific rulemaking authority to implement the provisions of chapter 508, F.S. DACS will maintain records, issue the certification cards and registration approvals or denials, select the certification training organizations, notify DHSMV based on the Council's approval, and inspect the records of wrecker companies. It is required to keep and store all records of the council and to provide administrative support and staff.

Registration Process and Requirements

The annual registration fee will be \$495. All registrants, equitable owners, partners, or those with executive management control must be fingerprinted, and must bear the cost of fingerprinting. State fingerprint processing will cost the registrant \$23 for each person processed, and an additional fee for federal processing will be charged. DACS will issue a certificate with a number to the registrant. The certificate must be displayed in a conspicuous place in the company's place of business, and any company advertisement must bear the registration number. For the purposes of the bill, the term "advertisement" means a printed or graphic statement made in a newspaper or other publication or contained in any notice, handbill, or sign, including signage on a vehicle, flyer, catalog, or letter.

In addition, registered wrecker companies are required to certify to DACS that they carry the additional commercial motor vehicle liability insurance as currently required under s. 627.7415, F.S.

Annual renewals are subject to a \$25 late fee. Unless local licensing requirements are met and maintained, and the company can present proof of the additional commercial vehicle liability insurance, a wrecker company may not renew its registration.

DACS may deny or refuse registration renewal if:

- o the wrecker company does not meet or adhere to registration requirements;
- o the owners or executive managers have been convicted of a felony within the last 10 years;
- o the owners or executive managers have been convicted in the last 10 years of any crime involving repossession, repair, motor vehicle theft, car jacking, chop shops, parts and accessories records, airbags, overcharging for repairs or parts, or towing or storage requirements;
- o the company fails to pay fines or penalties imposed under the new law;
- o the company has an action pending in any jurisdiction for violation of the new law; or
- o the company has a judgment against it for violation of the new law.

A wrecker company is required to maintain records of its wrecker services for at least 12 months at the principal place of business. It also must maintain records on each of its wrecker operators sufficient to demonstrate that the operator has successfully completed an approved wrecker operator continuing education course and is certified to perform wrecker services. These records must be maintained at the principal place of business for as long as the operator is employed by the wrecker company and for at least six months after. Organizations approved to conduct wrecker operator certification courses or continuing education courses are also required to maintain records for at least five years on persons who complete the courses. DACS is authorized to enter the place of business for the purpose of examining the records.

Training and certification process

In addition to wrecker company registration, the bill requires certification of wrecker operators. DACS must establish a certification program including certification courses, schools and exams, and provide for specialized certification for specialized wrecker services. DACS also must require the courses to issue appropriate certificates and cards acknowledging completion of certification requirements. DACS is authorized to adopt rules providing for issuance of certification to operators from different states who have met substantially similar certification requirements. Certification programs created by DACS, and those of other jurisdictions taken in lieu of Florida certification programs, must be approved by the Wrecker Operator Advisory Council.

In order to obtain certification, HB 341 w/CS requires that all wrecker operators must:

- o own or be employed by a wrecker company before they may provide wrecker services;
- o complete a six-month probationary period;
- o be endorsed as having completed specialty certification to provide specialized wrecker services; and
- o participate in continuing education programs.

Prohibited acts and penalties

According to HB 341 w/CS, wrecker companies, wrecker operators, or other employees or agents of the company are prohibited from:

- o Charging rates in excess of those set by local ordinance;
- o Violating the laws governing the FHP wrecker allocation system;
- o Violating the laws governing the local wrecker allocation system;
- o Violating the laws governing liens for towing or storing vehicles and vessels;
- o Violating the laws governing towing, removing, or storing vehicles and vessels;
- o Refusing to allow a law enforcement officer to inspect a towing and storage facility;
- o Allowing a non-certified person to perform wrecker services or specialized services for more than 6 months after first being employed by, or becoming an equitable owner of, the company;
- o Allowing an operator to provide specialized services without the proper endorsement; or
- o Performing an act prohibited by the new law, or failing to perform an act required by the new law.

HB 341 w/CS also creates a number of administrative and criminal penalties related to chapter 508, F.S., requirements. Among the administrative penalties, DACS may:

- o Issue a notice of noncompliance;
- o Impose an administrative fine of no more than \$5,000;
- o Issue cease and desist orders;
- o Revoke, suspend or refuse registration;
- o Impose a department specified probationary period;
- o Seek a civil remedy of up to \$5,000 per violation; or
- o Seek restitution on behalf of an aggrieved party.

DACS must notify DHSMV when a registration issued under the provisions of the bill has been suspended or revoked by order of DOACS. That notification must be sent within 10 days after issuance of the order.

Under the bill, operation of an unregistered wrecker company and performance of wrecker services without being employed by a registered wrecker company are third-degree felonies.

All fees, penalties, and other monies collected pursuant to this new law are deposited into DACS' General Inspection Trust Fund and may only be used to implement the new law.

Wrecker allocation system

Present Situation

The Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) is authorized in s. 321.051, F.S., to operate a wrecker operator system using qualified, reputable wrecker operators for the removal and storage of wrecked or disabled vehicles from crash scenes, and for the removal and storage of abandoned vehicles. All wrecker operators are eligible for use in the system provided their equipment meets recognized safety qualifications and mechanical standards set by the FHP for the size of vehicle the equipment is designed to handle.

FHP can set maximum rates for towing and storage of vehicles removed at its request, if the rates have not already been set by a county or municipality. A wrecker operator may pursue an appeal by writ of certiorari from the circuit court if its participation in the system is denied, suspended, or revoked.

Wrecker operators are prohibited from monitoring police radios for communications between patrol field units and the dispatcher to determine the location of a wrecked or disabled vehicle for the purpose of driving by the scene to initiate contact with the owner of the wrecked or disabled vehicle. This illegal monitoring is punishable by a civil fine of up to \$500. If the operator initiates contact before arrival of the dispatched operator, solicits towing, and tows the vehicle, or if the disabled vehicle owner or operator initiates contact, but the wrecker operator fails to disclose that he or she was not dispatched and fails to disclose all rates in writing for towing and storage, the drive-by wrecker operator commits a second-degree misdemeanor. A wrecker operator who falsely identifies him or herself as part of the system commits a first-degree misdemeanor. The law does not prohibit any person from calling a wrecker operator directly for services, even if that operator is not authorized to participate in the system.

Local governments are also authorized to operate a similar wrecker operator dispatch system, pursuant to s. 323.002, F.S.

In addition, current law provides regulations governing the operation of storage facilities containing towed vehicles held at the request of investigating law enforcement agencies, and provides for liens against towed and stored vehicles when the owners fail to pay towing and storage costs.

Effect of Proposed changes

The existing ss. 321.051 and 323.002, F.S., are rewritten in HB 341 w/CS, but the primary changes are made to reflect the wrecker registration and certification requirements imposed in the new chapter 508, F.S.

The bill defines and differentiates between wrecker companies and wrecker operators to clarify the distinction between those who own towing companies and those who drive tow trucks. It also renames the "wrecker operator system" as the "wrecker allocation system."

The key change is that only registered wrecker companies and certified operators would be able to participate in the wrecker allocation system. The law still allows the owner or operator of a disabled vehicle to hire an unauthorized wrecker; however, the law enforcement officer on the scene may, in the interest of public safety, dispatch an authorized wrecker operator if the officer believes it will arrive before the wrecker company requested by the motorist.

Liens assessed on towed and stored vehicles

Present Situation

Section 713.78, F.S., currently provides that when a wrecker or tow service properly tows a vehicle they have a lien against the vehicle for payment of reasonable towing and storage fees. The owner of the vehicle may not be charged storage fees if the vehicle has been stored for less than 6 hours. When a wrecker service tows and stores a motor vehicle the service must send notice to the registered owner and all lien holders by certified mail within 7 business days after the date of storage of the vehicle. The section further provides that a person regularly engaged in towing or storing vehicles is not liable for damages connected with the towing and storage of a vehicle if such towing and storage were done with reasonable care.

This section also limits the liability of a wrecker when towing or storing a vehicle. The section provides that a wrecker operator is not liable for the theft of a vehicle or personal property contained in a towed or stored vehicle, providing the wrecker uses reasonable care. The wrecker is not liable for damages when complying with the lawful directions of a law enforcement officer to remove a vehicle which is a hazard or obstructing the normal movement of traffic. The section provides a wrecker has used reasonable care if: the wrecker surrounds the storage facility with a chain-link or solid fence at least 6 feet in height; the storage facility is illuminated enough to reveal persons and vehicles at a distance of 150 feet; or the wrecker employs a night watchman, security dog, or security cameras.

In addition, current law requires any law enforcement agency requesting that a motor vehicle be removed from an accident scene, street, or highway to conduct an inventory and prepare a written record of all personal property found in the vehicle before the vehicle is removed by a wrecker operator. The wrecker operator may not be held liable for the loss of personal property which was not identified on the inventory record prepared by the law enforcement agency.

Section 713.78 (13), F.S., provides that upon receipt by DHSMV of written notice from a wrecker operator who claims a lien for recovery, towing, or storage of an abandoned vehicle, vessel, or mobile home upon instructions from any law enforcement agency, for which a certificate of destruction has been issued, DHSMV must place the name of the registered owner of that vehicle, vessel, or mobile home on the list of those persons who may not be issued a license plate or revalidation sticker for any motor vehicle. If the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home is owned jointly by more than one person, the name of each registered owner must be placed on the list. The section further provides the amount of the wrecker operator's lien for which the DHSMV will prevent issuance of a license plate or revalidation sticker may not exceed the amount of the charges for recovery, towing, and storage of the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home for 7 days. These charges may not exceed the maximum rates imposed by the ordinances of the respective county or municipality.

The registered owner of a vehicle, vessel, or mobile home may dispute a wrecker operator's lien, by notifying DHSMV of the dispute in writing, if at least one of the following applies:

- o The registered owner presents a notarized bill of sale proving the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home was sold in a private or casual sale before the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home was recovered, towed, or stored.
- o The registered owner presents proof that the Florida certificate of title of the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home was sold to a licensed dealer as defined in s. 319.001, F.S., before the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home was recovered, towed, or stored.

Effect of Proposed Changes

HB 341 w/CS amends s. 713.78, F.S., to provide a registered owner may dispute a wrecker operator's lien, if DHSMV's records were marked sold prior to the issuance of a certificate of destruction.

The section is further amended to provide the lien dispute resolution process in current law does not apply to a leased vehicle registered in the name of the lessor. Additionally, the revisions provide for reasonable attorney fees may be awarded to the prevailing party in complaints concerning the wrongful taking of property. Further, the bill provides that employees or authorized agents of a wrecker company are not liable for civil damages when removing a vehicle or vehicle cargo that is an imminent public safety hazard from a public road if requested by a law enforcement officer, deputy sheriff, or firefighter.

Mobile Homes **Present Situation**

Mobile homes and manufactured housing are generally covered by the same laws as other vehicles in terms of the chapter 713, F.S. Cognizant of potential changes in the lien and storage laws for vessels and vehicles, and how that might negatively impact the owners of mobile homes and other manufactured housing, plus the fact that companies that move mobile homes are not the same as the wrecker companies, the industry began drafting legislation tailored to its needs.

Effect of Proposed Changes

HB 341 w/CS creates s. 713.785, F.S., to provide for the placement of liens on mobile homes that have been legally recovered, removed, or stored for any amount of time by a mobile home transport company. These provisions are similar to the provisions in s. 713.18, F.S., authorizing liens of vehicles and vessels.

Mobile home transport companies are required to give notice by certified mail, return receipt requested to registered owners and lien holders within 7 days after taking possession. The bill also permits owners and lien holders to file an action against the mobile home transport company for a determination of whether the mobile home was wrongfully taken. During the proceeding the mobile home can be released to the owner or lien holder upon posting adequate security with the court. The court may award damages and costs to the prevailing parties in such actions. Mobile homes that remain unclaimed or for which recovery, towing, storage, or lot rental fees remain unpaid, may be sold at public auction after suitable notice. The certificate of title of a mobile home sold under the provisions of the bill will be free and clear of liens unless a court specifies otherwise. If the mobile home is to be sold for dismantling or destruction, the transport company must obtain a certificate of destruction from the county tax collector.

Mobile home transport companies, landlords, and subsequent purchasers are not responsible to the tenant for loss or damage to the mobile home or personal property if reasonable care is used in storing the mobile home. However, mobile home transport companies in possession of a mobile home must permit the owner or agent of the owner to inspect the home and remove personal property, unless there is a lien on the personal property.

The bill provides the following acts by a mobile home transport company constitute a misdemeanor:

- o Failure to provide notice to the owner or lien holders by certified mail that the mobile home transport company has taken possession of the mobile home and that the mobile home will be sold to satisfy a lien;
- o Failure to notify the owner or lien holders of a mobile home that it will be sold at least 15 days before the sale;
- o Failure to use reasonable care in storing a mobile home;
- o Failure to apply for a certificate of destruction for mobile homes to be destroyed; and
- o Failure to allow the owner or owner's agent to inspect or remove personal property from the mobile home.

HB 341 w/CS provides for placing the names of owners of mobile homes who have had a recovery, towing, or storage lien placed against them on a list of persons who may not be issued a mobile home revalidation sticker. An owner may have his or her name removed from the list by discharging

the lien through payment or posting a bond equal to the lien amount .

Other issues in HB 341 w/CS

- o Wrecker companies must accept at least two of the following three forms of payment: cash, cashier's check, money order, traveler's check; a valid personal check showing the name and address of the vehicle or vessel owner or operator; and a valid credit card.

- o HB 341 w/CS allows a license plate to be placed on the front of a wrecker, or of a heavy truck or truck tractor if a rear-end loading device could damage the plate if placed on the rear bumper. In addition, the bill allows heavy trucks bearing government license plates to display plates on the front

- o A wrecker may not be registered and licensed as such with DHSMV unless the owner of the vehicle is a wrecker company registered with DACS pursuant to the new chapter 508, F.S. This provision does not apply to wreckers that are registered under the International Registration Plan.

- o Local governments may impose regulations on wrecker operators and wrecker companies that are more restrictive than this new law, and may still levy occupational license taxes. DACS may enter into a cooperative agreement with any county or municipality that provides for the referral, investigation, and prosecution of consumer complaints alleging violations of the provisions of this bill. DACS may also delegate enforcement to any county or municipality entering into a cooperative agreement.

- o The bill provides immunity from liability for wrecker companies, wrecker operators, employees and agents of wrecker companies, law enforcement officers and other emergency response personnel from property damages or claims of damage for removal of vehicles or vehicle cargo from blocking the roadway when there is an imminent public safety hazard.

- o Harmonizes the various definitions of "wrecker" and "wrecker operator" throughout Florida Statutes.

C. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1: Technical; amends s. 120.80, F.S., to reflect changes in definitions created elsewhere in the bill.

Section 2: Creates s. 205.1975, F.S., prohibiting counties and municipalities from issuing local occupational licenses to unregistered wrecker companies.

Section 3: Amends s. 316.530, F.S., to delete the term "tow truck."

Section 4: Reenacts s. 316.550, F.S., to incorporate the amendments made to s. 320.01, F.S.

Section 5: Amends s. 316.605, F.S., providing for the front-end placement of license plates on vehicles with mechanical loading devices and on government-owned heavy trucks.

Section 6: Amends s. 320.01, F.S., to amend the definition of "wrecker."

Section 7: Amends s. 320.03, F.S., to replace "wrecker operator" with "wrecker company."

Section 8: Amends s. 320.0706, F.S., requiring license plates to be displayed on the front end of wreckers.

Section 9: Reenacts s. 320.08, F.S., to incorporate amendments made to s. 320.01, F.S.

Section 10: Amends s. 320.0821, F.S., providing that a wrecker shall display only one license plate regardless of its weight, and that it must be displayed on the front of the wrecker.

Section 11: Amends s. 320.0821, F.S., prohibiting DHSMV from renewing a license plate for a wrecker unless the company owning the wrecker is registered with the state, pursuant to chapter 508, F.S.

Section 12: Amends s. 320.13, F.S., to delete the term "tow truck" and add a cross-reference.

Section 13: Amends s. 321.051, F.S., to rename the wrecker operator system as the wrecker allocation system and add definitions. Requires that only wrecker companies registered under chapter 508, F.S., may be part of the allocation system. Specifies under what circumstances law enforcement officers may dispatch wrecker companies out of rotation or override the selection of a wrecker company by the owner/operator of the disabled vehicle needing a tow.

Section 14: Effective January 1, 2006, amends s. 323.001, F.S., to reflect terminology and registration changes implemented elsewhere in the bill.

Section 15: Effective January 1, 2006, amends s. 323.002, F.S., to rename the county and municipal wrecker operator system as "the county and municipal wrecker allocation system" and to reflect terminology and registration changes implemented elsewhere in the bill. Specifies that only wrecker companies registered pursuant to chapter 508, F.S., may be included in the allocation system.

Section 16: Creates ch. 508, F.S., related to Wrecker Services. Creates ss. 508.01, 508.02, 508.03, 508.04, 508.05, 506.06, 508.061, 508.07, 508.08, 508.09, 508.10, 508.11, 508.12, 508.13, 508.14, 508.15, 508.16, 508.17, 508.18, 508.19, and 508.20, F.S. Provides for definitions; creates a wrecker operator advisory council, assigned to the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DACS); provides DACS with rule-making authority; specifies registration requirements, renewal of registrations, denial of registrations, forms of payment wrecker companies must accept, operator certifications, certification cards, process, and continuing education; provides for DACS' inspection of employment records, specifies prohibited acts, administrative penalties, criminal penalties, fees, disposition of payments, recovery agent exemptions, preservation of ordinances, and records maintenance requirements of wrecker companies.

Section 17: Amends s. 713.78, F.S., to provide for dispute of a wrecker operator's lien if DHSMV records indicate that the vehicle, vessel, or mobile home was sold before issuance of a certificate of destruction. Specifies that the provisions of 713/78 (13), F.S., do not apply to any vehicle registered in the name of a lessor.

Section 18: Effective January 1, 2006, amends s. 713.78, F.S., to reflect the changes in terminology and definitions created pursuant to the new chapter 508, F.S. Requires an award of damages, costs, and reasonable attorney's fees for the prevailing party in a lien case. Authorizes law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency medical services providers, and authorized or unauthorized wrecker companies to remove vehicles and cargo from a public road without liability, and without the consent of the owner or operator, if the vehicle or cargo poses an imminent public- safety hazard. Specifies that amendments to this section do not affect the validity of liens established under this section of law prior to January 1, 2006.

Section 19: Effective January 1, 2006, creates s. 713.785, F.S., providing for the placement of liens on mobile homes that have been legally recovered, removed, or stored by a mobile home transport company. Authorizes the DHSMV to adopt rules to implement this new section of law.

Section 20: Amends s. 319.30, F.S., to include a cross-reference in the definition of "certificate of destruction" to include those certificates issued pursuant to the newly created s. 713.785, F.S.

Section 21: Effective January 1, 2006, amends s. 715.07, F.S., related to towing vehicles from real property. Clarifies that this section will address towing vehicles and vessels parked on real property without permission. Updates to include new wrecker-related terminology and registration requirements. Prohibits property owners from soliciting rebates from wrecker company or operator from using his or her services. Corrects cross-references.

Section 22: Effective January 1, 2005, repeals subsection (15) of s. 1.01, F.S., the definition of "wrecker operator."

Section 23: Provides for an appropriation of \$693,000 from the General Inspection Trust Fund to DACS and 10 additional FTE positions for the agency to implement the provisions of this act.

Section 24: Provides that the act shall take effect July 1, 2004, except where otherwise specified.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

DACS

Indeterminate in fiscal year 2005-2006, since the registration program created in HB 341 w/CS doesn't begin until December 31, 2005. Section 24 of the bill specifies that the first-year implementation of the wrecker registration and certification program will be paid by a transfer from DACS' General Inspection Trust Fund.

DACS' analysis indicates that in the first full fiscal year of 2006-2007, the registration fees could generate \$693,000, based on an average 1,400 wrecker companies paying the \$495 registration fee.

No accurate numbers exist of how many wrecker companies operate in Florida. The Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida, Inc., estimates there are between 1,200 and 1,500 wrecker companies. That means the registration fee could generate anywhere from \$594,000 to \$742,500 annually.

Registration fee revenues would be deposited in the General Inspection Trust Fund.

DHSMV

The agency reported no revenue increases from HB 341 w/CS.

Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)

An analysis of the original HB 341 provided by FDLE after the Transportation Committee voted in favor of the bill indicated that the agency could receive an estimated \$27,600 in revenues from the wrecker companies paying for background checks, as required under section 16 of the bill. Because of that section of the bill's delayed implementation, FDLE estimated about 20 percent of the minimum 1,200 wrecker companies and operators in Florida would pay the \$23 fee for a background check.

In subsequent years, the revenue to FDLE generated by the background check fee would be an estimated \$5,520, according to the analysis.

2. Expenditures:

DACS

In its analysis, DACS staff estimated that its fiscal year 2005-2006 operating costs would be \$636,477 for 10 FTEs and related expenditures. There also would be an estimated \$94,563 in non-operating costs, comprised of administrative/indirect costs and the general revenue service charge on the General Inspection Trust Fund.

The total estimated expenditure in fiscal year 2005-2006 is \$731,040, according to DACS. The expenditure estimates vary in subsequent years because of fewer non-recurring costs.

DHSMV

The agency reported no expenditures arising from HB 341 w/CS.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

Indeterminate. It is unknown at this time how much revenue local governments derive from occupational license fees from wrecker companies. If some wrecker companies decide not to register with the state, or delay registration for a year or two, then they would not be able to obtain an occupational license from their city or county of operation.

2. Expenditures:

Indeterminate. Some local governments may enter into cooperative agreements with DACS to help enforce the wrecker regulations, but the costs of such responsibilities is unknown at this time.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

Wrecker companies will be required to pay an annual registration fee of \$495 and comply with the new certification requirements. It is unknown at this time how much the certification and continuing education requirements, will cost industry members. Currently, the voluntary wrecker education courses cost from \$75 to \$130, according to one industry representative, while AAA said the classes can cost as much \$495. The wrecker industry also will incur the costs of fingerprinting and background checks to meet the new registration requirements.

The general public also is likely to be financially impacted, because some wrecker companies may raise their towing fees and other charges to cover the new costs of regulation. In any event, the financial cost to consumers is indeterminate at this time, as are the benefits of increased safety and the improved sense of trust and security consumers may experience from having access to better educated and better regulated wrecker operators.

HB 341 w/CS also may promote an increase in the number of companies offering wrecker education courses with competitive tuition prices, since certification and continuing education will be a requirement for all tow truck operators working for registered wrecker companies.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

Based on the fiscal analysis prepared by DACS, estimated revenues generated by the \$495 registration fee will not cover the agency's total costs to operate the wrecker regulation program next fiscal year. The revenue shortfall is estimated at \$38,040 next fiscal year. This net loss could be greater in coming years if fewer than the estimated 1,400 wrecker companies in Florida decide to register with DACS.

Representatives of the Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida, Inc., have said they will propose amending the bill at a later committee stop to raise the registration fee.

On a different issue, FDLE's analysis indicates, "while the impact of this bill does not necessitate additional FTE, this bill in combination with additional background screening bills could rise to the level requiring additional staffing" for that agency.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

This mandates provision is not applicable to HB 341 w/CS because the legislation does not require counties or municipalities to expend local funds or to raise local funds, nor does it reduce their state revenue-sharing.

2. Other:

None.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

Section 16 of HB 341 w/CS gives DACS specific and general rulemaking authority to implement the new wrecker regulatory provisions.

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

Legislative staff comments:

Staff of the Joint Administrative Procedures Committee (JAPC) and the House Governmental Operations Committee reviewed the rulemaking provisions in Section 16 of the bill, at the Transportation Committee staff's request. The provisions conferring rulemaking authority are sufficient for DACS to carry out its responsibilities.

JAPC staff expressed concern that several provisions of the bill provide that the Council, rather than DACS, will make certain decisions that appear to constitute final agency action for purposes of chapter 120. Staff cited several examples where the Council is directed to perform a significant task: approve certification courses, prescribe the minimum curricula, approve each organization offering the curricula and its courses, and approving out-of-state curricula.

"The council is described in the bill as an advisory body, the purpose of which is to advise and assist DACS," wrote JAPC staff. "Since the duties of the council are advisory only, it would be less confusing if the provisions noted above were clarified to provide that it is DACS, with the advice of or in consultation with the Council, which will make the decisions

DACS staff and a representative of the Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida, Inc., have indicated to Transportation Committee staff their intent is for DACS to issue the final agency action, and that due process will be afforded to everyone who files administrative challenges.

Affected parties' comments:

The Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida, Inc., supports the bill. The Florida Manufactured Housing Association and DHSMV support those sections of the bill that impact their clients or responsibilities. DACS supports the bill as long as there is a dedicated funding source to cover the agency's expenditures to develop the specified rules and to enforce the program provisions adopted by the Wrecker Operator Advisory Council.

The Florida Association of Counties and Florida League of Cities have reviewed the bill's sections that impact their clients and have expressed no concerns.

AAA Auto Club South and the Florida Independent Towing and Recovery Association of Florida say they oppose the bill. AAA expressed concerns over the cost of the bill to the entire wrecker industry, including what it referred to as the “mom and pop” wrecker companies and operators. AAA estimates that the cost could be in excess of \$2.2 million to the industry, including the costs of background checks, fingerprinting, educational classes, and lost worker time.

A representative of the Florida Independent Towing and Recovery Association of Florida expressed concerns about the number of exemptions from the registration and certification requirements, and the fact that the executive director of the Professional Wrecker Operators of Florida, Inc., would serve on the Council. He also described the \$495 fee as “excessive” and questioned the need for the regulations.

IV. AMENDMENTS/COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE & COMBINED BILL CHANGES

At its February 22, 2005, meeting, the House Transportation Committee adopted without objection two technical amendments.

The first amendment corrected a drafting error. It added in the new mobile-home lien provisions, in s. 713.785, F.S., the phrase “judgment for unpaid lot rental amount” that had been inadvertently omitted.

The second amendment deleted a proposed reference to “mobile home parks” and several cross-reference changes in s. 713.69, F.S., later determined to be unnecessary with the creation of a section of law specifically related to mobile home liens.

The committee then voted 14-0 to report the bill as favorable with a committee substitute.