

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/HB 1277

Residential Tenancies

SPONSOR(S): Patterson

TIED BILLS:

IDEN./SIM. BILLS: SB 2730

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR
1) <u>Committee on Constitution & Civil Law</u>	<u>7 Y, 0 N</u>	<u>Thomas</u>	<u>Birtman</u>
2) <u>Safety & Security Council</u>	<u>13 Y, 0 N, As CS</u>	<u>Thomas</u>	<u>Havlicak</u>
3) _____	_____	_____	_____
4) _____	_____	_____	_____
5) _____	_____	_____	_____

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

The bill amends the Florida Residential Landlord and Tenant Act to permit residential lease agreements to impose an early termination fee and/or liquidated damages on tenants who terminate their leases before the expiration of a lease. The total liquidated damages and any early termination fee cannot exceed two months' rent and is in addition to any unpaid rent, other charges that may be due under the rental agreement, and any rental concessions that the tenant received. Under existing law, a landlord's remedy for a tenant's early termination is the landlord's actual damages.

The bill amends s. 83.56, F.S., to provide that a landlord of government subsidized housing does not waive its ability to enforce violations of a lease agreement by a tenant if the landlord accepts rent from that tenant, provided the owner serves initial statutory and regulatory notice to the tenant within 45 days from when the landlord discovers, or should have reasonably discovered, the lease violation, and the landlord institutes a civil eviction action within 15 days after expiration of the notice attached to the complaint and exhaustion of all hearing rights of the tenant.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on state or local governments.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. HOUSE PRINCIPLES ANALYSIS:

Safeguard individual liberty – the bill increases the options of landlords and tenants regarding the conduct of their own affairs.

B. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Florida Landlord - Tenant Law

The Florida Residential Landlord and Tenant Act, first enacted in 1973, governs the relationship between landlords and tenants in a residential lease agreement.¹ A rental agreement specifies the terms and conditions of a tenant's occupation in a dwelling unit for a specific period of time.² The provisions of the Act specifically address the payment of rent,³ duration of leases,⁴ security deposits,⁵ maintenance of the dwelling and premises,⁶ termination of rental agreements,⁷ liquidated damages for failure to provide notice before vacating,⁸ penalty for holding over,⁹ and a landlord's remedies for the breach of a lease.¹⁰

Waiver of Noncompliance of Rental Agreement

Present law provides that most residential landlords waive any objection to lease violations by their tenants if the landlord has actual knowledge of the lease violation but accepts rent from the tenant anyway.¹¹ Similarly, a tenant waives any objection to lease violations by the landlord if the tenant has actual knowledge of the lease violation but pays rent to the landlord anyway.¹²

However, the waiver provision as applied to owners of government subsidized housing does not require knowledge by the landlord of the lease violation.¹³ Present law provides that the landlord of government subsidized housing waives their ability to enforce violations 45 days after the violation occurred – whether the landlord had knowledge of the violation or not. Further, current law requires landlords of government subsidized housing to institute civil eviction proceedings within 45 days of the violation, whether the landlord had knowledge of the violation or not.¹⁴ Under governmental administrative requirements, the landlords must first exhaust certain administrative processes before they can institute a civil action. Therefore, these landlords are often unable to meet the 45 day filing requirement, even in cases of serious lease violations.

¹ Part II of ch. 83, F.S. This part applies to the rental of a "dwelling unit" which is defined as a structure or part of a structure rented for use as a home, residence or sleeping place. It also includes mobile homes rented by a tenant. Section 83.43, F.S.

² Section 83.43(7), F.S., provides that: "Rental agreement" means any written agreement, or oral agreement if for less duration than 1 year, providing for use and occupancy of premises.

³ Section 83.46, F.S.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Section 83.49, F.S.

⁶ Sections 83.51 and 83.52, F.S.

⁷ Section 83.56, F.S.

⁸ Section 83.58, F.S.

⁹ Section 83.575, F.S.

¹⁰ Section 83.595, F.S.

¹¹ Section 83.56(5), F.S.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

Failure to Provide Notice Before Vacating

A tenant may be required by a rental agreement to notify a landlord that the tenant intends to vacate the rented premises at the end of the rental agreement.¹⁵ The rental agreement may require this notice to be provided up to 60 days before the end of the agreement.¹⁶ A tenant who fails to give the required notice may be liable for liquidated damages specified in the rental agreement.¹⁷ A month-to-month tenant may be required to pay an additional one month's rent for failing to give at least 15-days' notice of vacating the premises.¹⁸

Landlord's Remedies on Tenant's Breach/Early Termination of Lease

Should a tenant breach a rental agreement by leaving prior to the end of the rental term, a landlord may choose one of three remedies provided in s. 83.595, F.S.:

- Treat the lease as terminated and retake possession for his or her own account, thereby terminating any further liability of the tenant;
- Retake possession of the dwelling unit for the account of the tenant, holding the tenant liable for the difference between rental stipulated to be paid under the lease agreement and what, in good faith, the landlord is able to recover from renting to another tenant; or
- Stand by and do nothing, holding the tenant liable for the rent as it comes due.

A tenant who prematurely terminates a lease must be given credit for rents received by a landlord after the property is relet.¹⁹ A judgment for future rent due under a lease must include a provision for an accounting of rents received for reletting through the end of the lease term.²⁰

In *Yates v. Equity Residential Properties Trust*, a trial court found that s. 83.595, F.S., provides a landlord's only remedies.²¹ The facts in *Yates* involved rental agreements that imposed early termination fees, fees for failing to notify of lease termination,²² lease fulfillment fees, and concession payback charges. In effect, these fees were liquidated damages for early termination of a lease. The fees often amounted to several months' rent. The apartments, however, were typically relet in less than a month. Further, the landlord did not give terminating tenants credit for rents collected from new tenants. The court found that the landlord's practices amounted to the collection of double rent in violation of s. 83.595, F.S.

In *Olen Residential Realty Corp. v. Romine*, a court determined whether liquidated damages in a lease agreement are an unenforceable penalty.²³ In that case, a lease agreement gave the landlord an option to choose liquidated damages or to sue for actual damages caused by a tenant's termination of a lease. The landlord sought to enforce the collection of liquidated damages equal to about five-months rents. The court stated that:

A "liquidated damage" clause must fail if an option is granted to the landlord to either choose liquidated damages or to sue for actual damages because it indicates an intent

¹⁵ Section 83.575(1), F.S.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Section 83.575(2), F.S.

¹⁸ Section 83.575(3), F.S.

¹⁹ *Quintero-Chadid Corp. v. Gersten*, 582 So.2d 685, 689 (Fla. 3d DCA 1991).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Yates v. Equity Residential Properties Trust*, Finding of Fact and Conclusions of Law at 6 (Fla. 15th Cir. Ct. Dec. 1, 2004).

²² Some of the fees imposed for failure to give advance notice of lease termination were imposed before they were expressly authorized by statute.

²³ *Olen Residential Realty Corp. v. Romine*, 2004 WL 3322327 (Fla. 15th Cir. Ct. May 27, 2004).

to penalize the defaulting tenant and negates the intent to liquidate damages in the event of a breach. Thus, the tenant would always be at risk for damages greater than the liquidated sum. On the other hand, if the actual damages are less than the liquidated sum, the tenant would nevertheless be obligated by the “liquidated damages” clause because the landlord would opt to take the liquidated sum as it would represent the greater element of damage. As neither party intends the stipulated sum to be the agreed-upon measure of damages, the provision cannot be a valid liquidated damages clause.²⁴

The *Olen* court also cited authority that liquidated damages cannot be an arbitrary sum and that liquidated damages in a contract must reasonably estimate a loss. The court concluded that the contract attempted to impose an unenforceable penalty. The court further concluded that the remedies in s. 83.595, F.S., are a landlord’s exclusive remedies.

Prohibited Provisions in Rental Agreements

The conclusion that a landlord is limited to the remedies in s. 83.595, F.S., is supported by s. 83.47(1), F.S.²⁵ That section states in part:

- A provision in a rental agreement is void and unenforceable to the extent that it:
- (a) Purports to waive or preclude the rights, remedies, or requirements set forth in this part.
 - (b) Purports to limit or preclude any liability of the landlord to the tenant or of the tenant to the landlord, arising under law.

Additionally, s. 83.47, F.S., appears to prohibit lease agreements from allowing a tenant to pay less than the damages specified in s. 83.595, F.S., for early termination of a lease.

Liquidated Damages

Liquidated damages are damages specified in a contract to be paid in the event of a breach.²⁶ Accordingly, an early termination fee specified in a lease agreement functions as liquidated damages. The test as to when a liquidated damages provision will be upheld and not stricken as a penalty clause is as follows:

First, the damages consequent upon a breach must not be readily ascertainable. Second, the sum stipulated to be forfeited must not be so grossly disproportionate to any damages that might reasonably be expected to follow from a breach as to show that the parties could have intended only to induce full performance, rather than to liquidate their damages.²⁷

Additionally, a court’s interpretation of a liquidated damages clause may be affected by an inequity in bargaining power between the parties to a contract.²⁸

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ See also *Bell v. Kornblatt*, 705 So.2d 113 (Fla. 4th DCA 1998) (noting that a lease agreement may not waive a tenant’s statutory right to a 3-day notice before a landlord terminates a rental agreement for nonpayment of rent).

²⁶ *Lefemine v. Baron*, 573 So.2d 326, 328 (Fla. 1991).

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ See *Jenkins v. Eckerd Corp.*, 913 So.2d 43, 52 (Fla. 1st DCA 2005). The *Jenkins* court quoted Samuel Issacharoff, *Contracting for Employment: The Limited Return of the Common Law*, 74 TEX. L. REV. 1783, 1788 (1996), which states:

[C]haracteristic indicators of impediments to full and equal bargaining [are]: significant disparities in bargaining power between offeror and offeree; contracts of adhesion drafted by the offeror; asymmetries in the ability to breach the contractual guarantee of security; and the inability to seek a market remedy in the event of a breach

Effect of Proposed Changes

The bill amends s. 83.43, F.S., to revise the definition of "rental agreement" to provide that the term means any written agreement, including amendments or addenda made to the agreement. The bill further amends this section to provide a definition of the term "early termination fee" to mean "any charge, fee, or forfeiture that is provided for in a written rental agreement and is assessed to a tenant when a tenant vacates a dwelling unit before the end of the rental agreement" but does not include "[u]npaid rent through the end of the month in which the tenant occupied the dwelling unit" and "[c]harges for damages to the dwelling unit."

The bill amends s. 83.56(5), F.S., to provide that a landlord of government subsidized housing does not waive its ability to enforce violations of a lease agreement by a tenant if the landlord accepts rent from that tenant, provided the landlord serves initial statutory and regulatory notice to the tenant within 45 days from when the landlord discovers, or should have reasonably discovered, the lease violation, and the landlord institutes a civil eviction action within 15 days after expiration of the notice attached to the complaint and exhaustion of all hearing rights of the tenant.

This bill amends s. 83.595, F.S., to provide an additional remedy that a landlord may elect should a tenant breach a rental agreement by leaving prior to the end of the rental term. This remedy permits residential lease agreements to impose an early termination fee on tenants who terminate their leases before the expiration of a lease. Under this provision, the landlord is entitled to both an early termination fee and liquidated damages provided the combined total does not exceed an amount equal to two-months rent. Fees and damages collected under this provision are in addition to unpaid rental payments, "other charges due under the rental agreement through the end of the month in which the landlord retakes possession of the dwelling unit, and any rent concessions that the tenant has received up to the maximum of 1 month's rent." The term "rent concessions" is defined as "any amount contained in the rental agreement by which all or a portion of the base rent is reduced in consideration for the tenant's entering into the rental agreement." This remedy is available only if the tenant indicates acceptance at the time the rental agreement was made. This new remedy is not available if the breach is failure to give notice as provided in s. 83.575, F.S., as discussed under the heading "Failure to Provide Notice Before Vacating" above.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

C. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 amends s. 83.43, F.S., relating to definitions within the Florida Residential Landlord and Tenant Act.

Section 2 amends s. 83.56, F.S., relating to termination of a rental agreement.

Section 3 amends s. 83.595, F.S., relating to choice of remedies upon breach of a rental agreement by a tenant.

Section 4 provides an effective date.

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 authorizes additional options and remedies for landlords when tenants prematurely terminate their leases.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

Not applicable because this bill does not appear to require counties or cities to: spend funds or take action requiring the expenditure of funds; reduce the authority of counties or cities to raise revenues in the aggregate; or reduce the percentage of a state tax shared with counties or cities.

2. Other:

The early termination fees authorized in the bill function as liquidated damages. Further, these fees/liquidated damages allow a landlord's remedies for a tenant's early termination to exceed the landlord's actual damages. As such, under existing law, the early termination fees would likely be unenforceable penalties. Additionally, the bill gives a landlord the option to impose an early termination fee or collect the rents due under the lease. If a landlord's rental properties have a high occupancy rate, a landlord will likely opt to maximize his income and collect the early termination fee. If the properties have a low occupancy rate, a landlord will likely opt to collect the rents due under the lease. Under existing law, an option in a contract for liquidated damages or actual damages would not be valid.

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

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

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

None.

D. STATEMENT OF THE SPONSOR

No statement was submitted by the original bill sponsor.

The chair of the Safety & Security Council chose not to submit any further comments regarding the council substitute.

IV. AMENDMENTS/COUNCIL SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

On March 21, 2007, the Committee on Constitution & Civil Law adopted 3 amendments and reported the bill favorably as amended.

- Amendment one made technical changes to the bill, changing the term “rentals” to “rent,” “lease” to “rent,” and “leasing” to “renting.”
- Amendment two amends s. 83.56, F.S., to provide that a landlord does not waive the right to terminate a rental agreement or bring a civil action against a tenant, even though the landlord has accepted rent from that tenant, when that tenant has violated the terms of the rental agreement by engaging in violent or drug-related criminal activity.
- Amendment three clarifies that when a landlord chooses the new remedy created by the bill available when the tenant breaches the rental agreement or the tenant has surrendered possession of the dwelling unit to the landlord, that the landlord may only collect unpaid rent through the end of the month in which the landlord retakes possession of the dwelling unit.

On April 18, 2007, the Safety & Security Council adopted a strike-all amendment to the bill and reported the bill favorably as amended. The strike-all amendment incorporates amendments one and two that were adopted on March 21, 2007, by the Committee on Constitution & Civil Law. In addition, the strike-all amendment:

- Clarifies that the four remedies provided to a landlord under s. 83.595, F.S., are alternative remedies and that a landlord may choose only one of those options should a tenant breach a rental agreement by leaving prior to the end of the rental term;
- Amends s. 83.56, F.S., to provide that a landlord of government housing does not waive its ability to enforce violations of a lease agreement by a tenant if the landlord accepts rent from that tenant, provided the landlord serves initial statutory and regulatory notice to the tenant within 45 days from when the owner discovers, or should have reasonably discovered, the lease violation, and the landlord institutes a civil eviction action within 15 days after expiration of the notice attached to the complaint and exhaustion of all hearing rights of the tenant.

This analysis is written to address the bill as amended by the Council.