

**The Florida Senate**  
**BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Community Affairs Committee

BILL: SB 998

INTRODUCER: Senator Simmons and others

SUBJECT: Property Rights

DATE: March 1, 2011

REVISED: \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Wolfgang	Yeatman	CA	<b>Pre-meeting</b>
2.			JU	
3.			BC	
4.				
5.				
6.				

**I. Summary:**

This bill amends the Bert Harris Act to make the following changes to Florida’s statutory protections on real property rights. The bill:

- specifies that a moratorium on a development that is in effect for longer than 1 year is not a temporary impact to real property and may constitute an “inordinate burden;”
- changes a notification period from 180 days to 120 days;
- deletes the term “ripeness” and replaces it with language specifying when the prerequisites for judicial review are met;
- specifies that enacting a law or adopting a regulation does not constitute applying the law or regulation to a property; and
- specifies that sovereign immunity is waived for purposes of the Bert Harris Act.

This bill substantially amends section 70.001 of the Florida Statutes.

**II. Present Situation:**

**Takings**

The Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees that citizens’ private property shall not be taken for public use without just compensation. The “takings” clause of the Fifth Amendment is applicable to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment, which provides that “[n]o State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States, nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property,

without due process of law . . . .” The government may acquire private property through the power of eminent domain, provided the property owner is compensated.<sup>1</sup>

Article I, s. 2 of the State Constitution also guarantees all natural persons the right to “acquire, possess and protect property” and further provides that no person will be deprived of property without due process of law.<sup>2</sup> Article X, s. 6 of the State Constitution is complimentary to the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. It provides that “[n]o private property shall be taken except for a public purpose and with full compensation therefor paid to each owner . . . .”

In addition to actually physically infringing upon the property, certain regulations on property can constitute a taking. Where a governmental regulation results in permanent physical occupation of the property or deprives the owner of "all economically productive or beneficial uses" of the property, a "per se" taking is deemed to have occurred, thereby requiring full compensation for the property.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, where the regulation does not substantially advance a legitimate state interest, it is invalid<sup>4</sup> and the property owner may recover compensation for the period during which the invalid regulation deprived all use of the property.<sup>5</sup>

In other "takings" cases, courts have used a multi-factor, "ad hoc" analysis to determine whether a regulation has adversely affected the property to such an extent as to require government compensation. The factors considered by the courts include:

- the economic impact of the regulation on the property owner;
- the extent to which the regulation interferes with the property owner's investment-backed expectations;
- whether the regulation confers a public benefit or prevents a public harm (the nature of the regulation);
- whether the regulation is arbitrarily and capriciously applied; and
- the history of the property, history of the development, and history of the zoning and regulation.<sup>6</sup>

The Supreme Court, in *Tahoe-Sierra Preservation Council, Inc. v. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency*, rejected property owners' contentions that a three-year moratorium on development constituted a per se taking of property requiring compensation under the Takings Clause.<sup>7</sup> The court recognized that there are a wide range of “moratoria” that occur as a regular part of land use regulation such as “normal delays in obtaining building permits, changes in zoning ordinances, variances, and the like.”<sup>8</sup> The court ultimately determined that the length of time that

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<sup>1</sup> Chapters 73 and 74, F.S.

<sup>2</sup> Art. I, s. 9, Fla. Const.

<sup>3</sup> *Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council*, 505 U.S. 1003 (1992).

<sup>4</sup> *See Nollan v. California Coastal Comm'n*, 483 U.S. 825 (1987).

<sup>5</sup> *See First English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Glendale v. County of Los Angeles*, 482 U.S. 304 (1987).

<sup>6</sup> *See Reahard v. Lee County*, 968 F.2d 1131, 1136 (11th Cir. 1992). *See also Keystone Bituminous Coal Assn. v. DeBenedictis*, 480 U.S. 470 (1987); *Penn Central Transportation Co. v. New York City*, 438 U.S. 104 (1978); *Graham v. Estuary Properties*, 399 So. 2d 1374 (Fla. 1981).

<sup>7</sup> 535 U.S. 302 (2002).

<sup>8</sup> *See id.* (quoting *First English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Glendale v. County of Los Angeles*, 482 U.S. 304 (1987)).

a parcel of property was undevelopable was one of the many factors to be considered when determining whether a taking has occurred.

### **The Bert Harris Act**

In 1995, the Bert Harris Act was enacted by the Legislature to provide a new cause of action for private property owners whose property has been “inordinately burdened” by state and local government action that may not rise to the level of a “taking” under the State or Federal Constitution.<sup>9</sup> The inordinate burden applies either to an existing use of real property or a vested right to a specific use.<sup>10</sup>

Under the Bert Harris Act, the term “existing use” means:

an actual, present use or activity on the real property, including periods of inactivity which are normally associated with, or are incidental to, the nature or type of use or activity or such reasonably foreseeable, nonspeculative land uses which are suitable for the subject real property and compatible with adjacent land uses and which have created an existing fair market value in the property greater than the fair market value of the actual, present use or activity on the real property.<sup>11</sup>

In *City of Jacksonville v. Coffield*, the First District Court of Appeals held that a city’s closure of a public road did not inordinately burden an existing use or a vested right to use of the property under the Bert Harris Act.<sup>12</sup> The court held that the property owner’s planned development was not an existing use to the property, nor did he have a vested right to develop the property prior to the city’s closing the public road near the property.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, the court stated that once the property owner “learned that an application had been filed to close the only roadway providing ingress and egress to the property, development of the property into eight single-family lots was, if still a possibility, by no means a ‘reasonably foreseeable, nonspeculative,’ use of the property.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore the court stated that:

Determinations under the Act that a claimant has “an existing use of the real property or a vested right to a specific use of the real property” and that government action has permanently precluded the claimant from attaining “the reasonable, investment-backed expectation for the existing use of the real property or a vested right to a specific use of the real property” are conclusions of law.<sup>15</sup>

The court then proceeded to review the case *de novo*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Section 70.001(1) and (9), F.S.

<sup>10</sup> Section 70.001(2)-(3)(a), F.S.

<sup>11</sup> Section 70.001, F.S.

<sup>12</sup> 18 So. 2d (Fla. 1st DCA 2009).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

“The existence of a ‘vested right’ is to be determined by applying the principles of equitable estoppel or substantive due process under the common law or by applying the statutory law of this state.”<sup>17</sup> The common law doctrine of equitable estoppel limits the government in the exercise of its power over real property when “a property owner (1) relying in good faith (2) upon some act or omission of the government (3) has made such a substantial change in position or incurred such excessive obligations and expenses that it would be highly inequitable and unjust to destroy the rights he has acquired.”<sup>18</sup>

An often quoted District Court of Appeal Case said, “the theory of estoppel amounts to nothing more than an application of the rules of fair play.”<sup>19</sup> Equitable estoppel applies against a governmental entity “only in rare instances and exceptional circumstances;” the government’s act must “go beyond mere negligence.”<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the elements of equitable estoppel, the landowner’s knowledge of future changes to a zoning ordinance is an important consideration in determining whether the landowner has obtained a vested right. A series of cases from the Florida Supreme Court have emphasized that the doctrine of equitable estoppel may not be invoked where “the party claiming to have been injured by relying upon an official determination had good reason to believe before or while acting to his detriment that the official mind would soon change.”<sup>21</sup> *Sakolsky v. City of Coral Gables (Sakolsky)*,<sup>22</sup> clarified the rule stating that “[n]otice or knowledge of mere equivocation independent of actual infirmities or pending official action cannot operate to negative or prevent reliance on the official act.”<sup>23</sup>

An inordinate burden is a government action that has directly restricted or limited the use of real property such that the property owner is permanently unable to attain the reasonable, investment-backed expectation for:

- the existing use of the real property;
- a vested right to a specific use of the real property with respect to the real property as a whole; or
- when the property owner is left with existing or vested uses that are unreasonable such that the property owner bears permanently a disproportionate share of a burden imposed for the good of the public, which in fairness should be borne by the public at large.

<sup>17</sup> Section 70.001, F.S.

<sup>18</sup> *Smith v. City of Clearwater*, 383 So. 2d 681 (Fla. 2d DCA 1980). See also *Coral Springs Street Systems, Inc. v. City of Sunrise*, 371 F.3d 1320 (11th Cir. 2004).

<sup>19</sup> *Equity Resources Inc. v. County of Leon*, 643 So. 2d 1112, 1119-1120 (Fla. 1st DCA 1994); *Branca v. City of Miramar*, 634 So. 2d 604, 606 (Fla. 1994); *Town of Largo v. Imperial Homes Corp.*, 309 So. 2d 571 (Fla. 2d DCA 1975).

<sup>20</sup> *Villas of Lake Jackson, Ltd. v. Leon County*, 884 F. Supp. 1544 (N.D. Fla. 1995) (citing *Council Bros., Inc. v. City of Tallahassee*, 634 So. 2d 264, 266 (Fla. 1st DCA 1994) and *Alachua County v. Cheshire*, 603 So. 2d 1334, 1337 (Fla. 1st DCA 1992) *aff’d*, 121 F.3d 610 (11th Cir. 1997) (finding that although fact questions existed on issue of equitable estoppel and vested property right, rational basis for rezoning precluded due process claims).

<sup>21</sup> *Sharrow v. City of Dania*, 83 So. 2d 274 (Fla. 1955); *Gross v. City of Miami*, 62 So. 2d 418 (Fla. 1953) (“It would appear childish to assert that the permittees were without knowledge of these undisputed facts and for the respondents to wholly disregard them and simultaneously incur financial obligations incidental to the construction of the building under the questioned permit, shows that they acted while red flags were flying and cannot complain of lack of notice.”); *City of Ft. Lauderdale v. Lauderdale Industrial Sites*, 97 So. 2d 47 (Fla. 2d DCA 1957); *City of Miami v. State ex rel. Ergene, Inc.*, 132 So. 2d 474, 476 (Fla. 3d DCA 1961) (*per curiam*).

<sup>22</sup> 151 So. 2d 433 (Fla. 1963).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

The terms “inordinate burden” or “inordinately burdened” do not include:

- temporary impacts to real property;
- impacts to real property occasioned by governmental abatement;
- prohibition, prevention, or remediation of a public nuisance at common law or a noxious use of private property; or
- impacts to real property caused by an action of a governmental entity taken to grant relief to a property owner.

Under s. 70.001, F.S., a property owner seeking compensation must present a written claim to the head of the governmental agency whose action caused the inordinate burden 180 days (90 days for agriculture) prior to bringing a suit. The written notice must be accompanied by a valid appraisal that shows the loss of the fair market value. The property owner must commence his or her cause of action within one year of the date the “law or regulation is first applied by the governmental entity.” This has been interpreted as starting the running of the time limitation when the legislative or quasi-legislative restriction is adopted.<sup>24</sup>

The governmental entity must make a written settlement offer within the 180-day-notice period that may include:

- An adjustment of land development or permit standards or other provisions controlling the development or use of the land;
- Increases or modifications in the density, intensity, or use of areas of development;
- The transfer of development rights;
- Land swaps or exchanges;
- Mitigation, including payments in lieu of on-site mitigation;
- Location of the least sensitive portion of the property;
- Conditioning the amount of development permitted;
- A requirement that issues be addressed on a more comprehensive basis than a single proposed use or development;
- Issuance of the development order, a variance, special exception, or other extraordinary relief;
- Purchase of the real property, or an interest therein, by an appropriate governmental agency; or
- No changes to the action of the governmental entity.<sup>25</sup>

If the property owner accepts the settlement offer, then the government implements it pursuant to s. 70.001(4)(d), F.S. If the settlement offer is declined, the government must issue within the 180-day period a written ripeness decision, which must contain identification of allowable uses on the affected land. This ripeness decision serves as the last prerequisite to judicial review, thus allowing the landowner to file a claim in circuit court.

Under s. 70.001(6)(a), F.S., the court decides if there was an existing use of the property or a vested right to a specific use, and if so, whether the governmental action inordinately burdened the property. Private property is inordinately burdened when a government action has directly

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<sup>24</sup> See *Citrus County v. Halls River Development, Inc.*, 2009 WL 722053 (Fla. 5th DCA 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Section 70.001(4), F.S.

restricted or limited the use of the property so that the owner is unable to attain reasonable, investment-backed expectations for the existing use, or a vested right in the existing use, of the property as a whole. Alternatively, property is inordinately burdened if the owner is left with existing or vested uses which are unreasonable such that the owner would permanently bear a disproportionate share of a burden imposed for the public good which should be borne by the public at large.<sup>26</sup>

If the court finds the governmental action has inordinately burdened the subject property, the court will apportion the percentage of the burden if more than one governmental entity is involved. The court then impanels a jury to decide the monetary value, pursuant to s. 70.001(6)(b), F.S., based upon the loss in fair market value attributable to the governmental action. The prevailing party is entitled to reasonable costs and attorney's fees, pursuant to s. 70.001(6)(c), F.S., if the losing party did not make, or reject, a bona fide settlement offer.

*Citrus County v. Halls River Development* held that the one-year limitation period applicable under the Bert Harris Act accrued on the date the statute was amended and first impacted the land in question by changing its zoning designation from mixed use to low intensity coastal and lakes.<sup>27</sup> However *M & H Profit, Inc. v. Panama City*, stated that the clear and unambiguous language of the Bert Harris Act establishes that the law is limited to "as-applied" challenges not facial challenges based on the mere enactment of a new ordinance or regulation.<sup>28</sup>

### **Sovereign Immunity**

The doctrine of sovereign immunity, as derived from the English common law, provides that the government cannot be sued in tort without its consent.<sup>29</sup> This blanket of immunity applies to all subdivisions of the state including its agencies, counties, municipalities, and school boards; however, Article X, s. 13 of the State Constitution, provides that sovereign immunity may be waived through an enactment of general law.

The Legislature, in s. 768.28, F.S., has expressly waived sovereign immunity in tort actions for claims against its agencies and subdivisions resulting from the negligent or wrongful act or omission of an employee acting within the scope of employment, but established limits on the amount of liability. A claim or judgment by any one person may not exceed \$100,000, and may not exceed \$200,000 paid by the state or its agencies or subdivisions for claims arising out of the

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<sup>26</sup> Section 70.001(3)(e), F.S.

<sup>27</sup> 8 So. 3d 413 (Fla. 5th DCA 2009).

<sup>28</sup> 28 So. 3d 71 (Fla. 1st DCA 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Wetherington and Pollock, *Tort Suits Against Governmental Entities in Florida*, 44 Fla. L. Rev. 1 (1992); Public policy in support of sovereign immunity includes: (a) protecting public funds from excessive encroachments; (b) insulating the Legislature's authority over budget expenditures from judicial directives to disburse funds; (c) enabling government officials to engage in decision making without risking liability; and (d) ensuring that the efficient administration of government is not jeopardized by the constant threat of suit. Policy against sovereign immunity includes: (a) leaving those who have been injured by governmental negligence without remedy; (b) failing to deter wrongful government conduct; and (c) limiting public knowledge of governmental improprieties. House of Representatives Committee on Claims, *Sovereign Immunity: A Survey of Florida Law*, at 1-2, January 25, 2001.

same incident or occurrence. Notwithstanding this limited waiver of sovereign immunity, certain discretionary governmental functions remain immune from tort liability.<sup>30</sup>

The Bert Harris Act provides a process for claims against a governmental entity for certain actions. Specifically, the provisions of the Act operate as a separate and distinct cause of action from the law of takings to provide “for relief, or payment of compensation, when a new law, rule, regulation, or ordinance of the state or a political entity in the state, as applied, unfairly affects real property.”<sup>31</sup>

Section 70.001(13), F.S., provides that, “This section does not affect the sovereign immunity of government.” In 2003, the Third District Court of Appeal in *Royal World Metropolitan, Inc. v. City of Miami Beach* overturned a trial court's decision that subsection (13) serves to bar a cause of action against a governmental entity.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, the court found s. 70.001, F.S., “evinces a sufficiently clear legislative intent to waive sovereign immunity as to a private property owner whose property rights are inordinately burdened . . . .”<sup>33</sup>

### III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill contains a number of “whereas” clauses articulating the reasons for the amendments to current law.

**Section 1** amends s. 70.001, F.S. The bill restructures the definition of existing use to make it clearer that the term “existing use” has two separate definitions:

- (1) an actual, present use or activity on the real property, including periods of inactivity which are normally associated with, or are incidental to, the nature or type of use or activity *or*
- (2) such reasonably foreseeable, nonspeculative land uses which are suitable for the subject real property and compatible with adjacent land uses and which have created an existing fair market value in the property greater than the fair market value of the actual, present use or activity on the real property.

The bill clarifies that both “inordinate burden” *and* “inordinately burdened” mean the same thing.

The bill specifies that a moratorium on a development<sup>34</sup> that is in effect for longer than 1 year is not a temporary impact to real property and may constitute an “inordinate burden.”

The bill changes the requirement that property owners who seek compensation under the Bert Harris Act present the claim in writing to the head of the governmental entity 180 days prior to filing an action to make it 120 days prior to an action.

<sup>30</sup> See *Commercial Carrier Corp., v. Indian River County*, 371 So. 2d 1010, 1019 (Fla. 1979), citing *Evangelical United Brethren Church v. State*, 67 Wash. 2d 246, 407 P.2d 440 (1965).

<sup>31</sup> Section 70.001(1), F.S. Section 70.001(13), F.S., provides that “section does not affect the sovereign immunity of government”.

<sup>32</sup> See *Royal World Metropolitan, Inc. v. City of Miami Beach*, 863 So. 2d 320 (Fla. 3rd DCA 2003).

<sup>33</sup> See *id.* at 322.

<sup>34</sup> Development, as defined in s. 380.04, F.S., means the carrying out of any building activity or mining operation, the making of any material change in the use or appearance of any structure or land, or the dividing of land into three or more parcels.

The bill specifies that payment of compensation can be part of a settlement offer from the local government.

The bill deletes the term “ripeness” but leaves the language requiring the local government to provide a written decision identifying the allowable uses to which the subject property may be put. The bill clarifies that the failure of the local government to issue the decision within the notice period constitutes the local government’s final decision identifying the uses for the subject property. For the purposes of fulfilling the prerequisites to judicial review on the merits, the issuance or failure to issue the written decision operates as a final decision that has been rejected by the property owner.

The bill specifies that enacting a law or adopting a regulation does not constitute applying the law or regulation to a property. This provision should allow property owners to sue when the restrictions are applied to their property without being excluded by the statute of limitations even if the law or regulation was enacted more than a year before it is applied to the property.

The bill deletes the section that states that s. 70.001, F.S., does not affect the sovereign immunity of government and replaces it with language that waives sovereign immunity for causes of action under s. 70.001, F.S. This is consistent with how the section of law was interpreted by the courts in *Royal World Metropolitan, Inc. v. City of Miami Beach*.<sup>35</sup>

**Section 2** states that the act is applied prospectively and does not affect pending litigation.

**Section 3** provides an effective date.

#### **IV. Constitutional Issues:**

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

#### **V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

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<sup>35</sup> See *Royal World Metropolitan, Inc. v. City of Miami Beach*, 863 So. 2d 320 (Fla. 3rd DCA 2003).



**B. Private Sector Impact:**

The bill expands the options for private property owners to obtain compensation or another remedy for governmental action that inordinately burdens real property by making it clear that certain moratoria lasting more than one year are not necessarily “temporary” so as to be excluded from the definition of inordinate burden.

**C. Government Sector Impact:**

The bill reduces the timeframe for the governmental entity to respond to the claim, and expressly waives sovereign immunity for claims under the Act.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

Although the second “whereas” clause states that it intends to clarify that certain determinations under the act are questions of law and fact, none of the bill language seems to do anything to change the decision of the court in *City of Jacksonville v. Coffield* that the issues discussed are questions of law.<sup>36</sup>

**VIII. Additional Information:****A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

**B. Amendments:**

None.

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This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill’s introducer or the Florida Senate.

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<sup>36</sup> 18 So. 2d (Fla. 1st DCA 2009).