

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
FINAL BILL ANALYSIS**

BILL #:	HB 7017	FINAL HOUSE FLOOR ACTION:	
SPONSOR(S):	Civil Justice Subcommittee and Spano	116 Y's	0 N's
COMPANION BILLS:	(SB 746)	GOVERNOR'S ACTION:	Approved

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

HB 7017 passed the House on March 22, 2013, and subsequently passed the Senate on April 4, 2013. The bill repeals terms of courts.

At one time, circuit court judges literally "rode the circuit," travelling from one county seat to the next for the purpose of conducting court hearings. In the past when everyone endured difficult travel and slow communications, it was important that the circuit judge show up on a date certain to conduct the court's business. Terms of court were developed to fill that need, and were required by the state constitution until 1957.

Today, terms of court are an archaic concept. This bill repeals terms of court and makes conforming changes to various statutes. The bill also creates new statutes regarding the terms of local grand juries and limiting withdrawal of an appellate mandate that conform to the traditional ties that those concepts have related to the terms of court.

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

The bill was approved by the Governor on April 17, 2013, ch. 2013-25, L.O.F., and will become effective January 1, 2014.

I. SUBSTANTIVE INFORMATION

A. EFFECT OF CHANGES:

Background

At one time, circuit court judges literally "rode the circuit," travelling from one county seat to the next for the purpose of conducting court. In a day of difficult travel and slow communications, it was important that the circuit judge show up on a date certain to conduct the court's business.¹ Terms of court were developed to fill that need, and were required by the state constitution² until Article V was substantially rewritten in 1957. Current law creates two or more terms of court in each of the counties. See ss. 26.22-.365, F.S.

In the past, on the first day of the term of court the circuit judge would conduct a ceremonial opening of the term of court, the clerk would summon a new grand jury, the sheriff would bring in the prisoners for a docket sounding, and the work of the circuit court would commence. The circuit judge was generally expected to stay in town until the judicial work was complete, but also was required to leave in time to make it to the next county for the start of that county's term of court. After the circuit judge left town, the court was considered "in vacation." A circuit judge is fined \$100 for missing the first day of the term of court.³

In the early days of the state, work as a supreme court justice was a part-time occupation. The justices similarly held terms of court in order that they have a fixed time to travel to Tallahassee to conduct appellate sessions. The concept for terms of court was adopted in statute when the intermediate district courts of appeal were created in 1957. Section 35.11, F.S., requires each of the district courts of appeal to meet at least once in every regular term in each judicial circuit within the district.

Today, terms of court are an archaic concept. It does not appear that any of the courts formally open a term of court with the traditional ceremony. Circuit judges come and go from each of the counties as needed and far more often than once every six months. Two of the five district courts of appeal are known to regularly travel the district for the purpose of conducting oral argument. It is unknown when the last time a circuit judge was fined for nonappearance at the first day of a term.

Reference to terms of court is still relevant today for two purposes: designating the terms of local grand juries and limiting withdrawal of an appellate mandate.

Historically, although not explicitly required by statute, the terms of a grand jury coincide with the term of the court.

In appellate courts, a mandate is the title of the document from the appellate court directing the lower court what to do based on the appellate court's decision in the case. The terms of court limit an appellate court's ability to withdraw a mandate, a rare procedure. The Florida Supreme Court in 1932 explained the scope and limits of the power to withdraw a mandate:

But, be that as it may, a majority of the court have reached the conclusion that the correct rule, which should be recognized and applied in such situation, is that the jurisdiction of this court, like the jurisdiction of courts generally, persists to the end of the term, and then terminates, but

¹ See <http://2ndcircuit.leoncountyfl.gov/courtHistory/firsthundred.php>, which describes the history of the Second Judicial Circuit, including how the terms of court once provided for the circuit judge to travel down the Apalachicola River, and were changed to accommodate the arrival of steamboat service allowing for easier upstream travel (last accessed January 25, 2013).

² Article V, s. 8 of the Constitution of 1885 included this sentence: "Such Judge shall hold at least two terms of his court in each county within his Circuit every year, at such times and places as shall be prescribed by law, and may hold special terms."

³ Sections 26.37 and 26.39, F.S.

that, during the term at which a judgment of this court is rendered, this court has jurisdiction and power which it may exercise, as the circumstances and justice of the case may require, to reconsider, revise, reform, or modify its own judgments for the purpose of making the same accord with law and justice, and that it has power to recall its own mandate for the purpose of enabling it to exercise such jurisdiction and power in a proper case.⁴

Under current law, a mandate may only be withdrawn during the current term of the appellate court, which leads to the odd result of some appellate court opinions being subject to withdrawal for nearly six months while others may only be subject to withdrawal for a few days.

Effect of the Bill

The bill repeals statutory terms of court applicable to the circuit courts, district courts of appeal, and the Supreme Court. It also makes the following conforming changes:

- Repeals the fine for nonattendance by a circuit judge.
- Repeals a requirement that a circuit judge call the docket at the end of the term.
- Repeals a requirement that district courts of appeal hear oral arguments in each of the judicial circuits in every term of court.
- Repeals a requirement that criminal cases be heard in the term before civil cases.
- Repeals a requirement that a criminal case be heard in the same term of court that the indictment was handed down unless the court holds the case to the next term for good cause.
- Removes references to terms of court in statutes regarding county sheriffs.
- Removes references to terms of court in the definitions of three crimes. Two of those crimes relate to the penalty for a repeat offense of uttering. Those statutes are amended to reference offenses committed within a six month period (which approximates a term of court).
- Removes references to terms of court in the statute on contempt of court.
- Removes the requirement that a criminal defendant show up on the first day of a term of court if the appearance bond is unclear.
- Requires the chief judge of the circuit to set the terms of a grand jury.
- Removes reference to terms of court in statute requiring a witness in a criminal case to appear in court.

The bill creates two new conforming statutes. These new sections:

- Allow the Supreme Court to establish terms of court for the Supreme Court and for the lower courts, if the court wishes.
- Provide in statute that an appellate court may withdraw a mandate for up to 120 days after it is issued. The conditions upon which withdrawal is allowed are taken from the case law quoted above. The time commences upon issuance of the mandate.

⁴ *Chapman v. St. Stephens Protestant Episcopal Church, Inc.*, 138 So. 630 (Fla. 1932). The *Chapman* case specifically provides that the power to withdraw a mandate may be limited by statute.

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 does not appear to have any direct economic impact on the private sector.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.