

**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.)

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Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Judiciary

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BILL: CS/SB 1314

INTRODUCER: Banking and Insurance Committee and Senator Bradley

SUBJECT: Electronic Noticing of Trust Accounts

DATE: March 30, 2015

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

|    | ANALYST          | STAFF DIRECTOR | REFERENCE | ACTION             |
|----|------------------|----------------|-----------|--------------------|
| 1. | <u>Billmeier</u> | <u>Knudson</u> | <u>BI</u> | <u>Fav/CS</u>      |
| 2. | <u>Davis</u>     | <u>Cibula</u>  | <u>JU</u> | <u>Pre-meeting</u> |
| 3. | _____            | _____          | <u>RC</u> | _____              |

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**Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:**

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

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**I. Summary:**

CS/SB 1314 provides a mechanism for trustees to provide electronic notices relating to trust accounts. A trustee has a duty to keep beneficiaries of an irrevocable trust reasonably informed of the trust and its administration. Specifically, the trustee must provide beneficiaries with an accounting of the trust at specified periods, disclosure of documents related to the trust, and notice of specific events related to the administration of the trust.

The Florida Trust Code currently provides that the only permissible methods of sending notice or a document to such persons are by first-class mail, personal delivery, delivery to the person's last known place of residence or place of business, or a properly directed facsimile or other electronic message. However, for many reasons, some beneficiaries prefer to receive, store, and access correspondence and documents through secured websites and accounts. Trustees also prefer to provide sensitive financial information through secured web accounts rather than through electronic messages that carry greater security risks. Although financial institutions commonly use secure websites for providing statements and other disclosures related to bank or credit accounts, such methods are rarely used for trust accounts due to a perceived lack of authorization within current law.

The bill authorizes a trustee to post required documents to a secure website or account if a beneficiary opts in to receiving electronic documents through a secure website or account. The bill also specifies when notice or the delivery of a document by electronic message or posting is

complete and presumed received by the intended recipient for purposes of commencing a limitations period for breach of trust claims.

## II. Present Situation:

“A trust is a fiduciary relationship<sup>1</sup> with respect to property, subjecting the person by whom the title to the property is held to equitable duties to deal with the property for the benefit of another person, which arises as a result of a manifestation of an intention to create it.”<sup>2</sup> A trust involves three interest holders: the settlor<sup>3</sup> who establishes the trust; the trustee<sup>4</sup> who holds legal title to the property held for the benefit of the beneficiary; and lastly, the beneficiary<sup>5</sup> who has an equitable interest in property held subject to the trust.

The Florida Trust Code<sup>6</sup> (the “code”) requires a trustee to administer the trust “in good faith, in accordance with its terms and purposes and the interests of the beneficiaries, and in accordance with [the] code,”<sup>7</sup> and also imposes a duty of loyalty upon the trustee.<sup>8</sup> The violation by a trustee of a duty owed to a beneficiary is a breach of trust.<sup>9</sup>

### Disclosure and Notice of Trust Administration

To be able to enforce the trustee’s duties, the beneficiary of a trust must know of the existence of the trust and be informed about the administration of the trust:

If there were no duty to inform and report to the beneficiary, the beneficiary might never become aware of breaches of trust or might be unaware of breaches until it is too late to obtain relief. In addition, providing information to the beneficiary protects the trustee from claims being brought long after events that allegedly constituted a breach, because the statute of limitations or the doctrine of laches will prevent the beneficiary from pursuing stale claims. As a result, the duty to inform and report to the beneficiary is fundamental to the trust relationship.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Brundage v. Bank of America*, 996 So.2d 877, 882 (Fla. 4th DCA 2008) (trustee owes a fiduciary duty to settlor/beneficiary).

<sup>2</sup> 55A FLA.JUR.2D *Trusts* ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Settlor” means a person, including a testator, who creates or contributes property to a trust. Section 736.0103(18), F.S.

<sup>4</sup> “Trustee” means the original trustee and includes any additional trustee, any successor trustee, and any cotrustee. Section 736.0103(23), F.S.

<sup>5</sup> “Beneficiary” means a person who has a present or future beneficial interest in a trust, vested or contingent, or who holds a power of appointment over trust property in a capacity other than that of trustee. Section 736.0103(4), F.S.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter 736, F.S.

<sup>7</sup> Section 736.0801, F.S.

<sup>8</sup> Section 736.0802(1), F.S.

<sup>9</sup> Section 736.1001(1), F.S.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin D. Millard, *The Trustee’s Duty to Inform and Report Under the Uniform Trust Code*, 40 REAL PROPERTY, PROBATE AND TRUST J. 373, 375, (summer 2005)

[http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/real\\_property\\_trust\\_and\\_estate\\_law\\_journal/V40/02/2005\\_aba\\_rpt\\_e\\_journal\\_v40\\_no2\\_summer\\_master.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/real_property_trust_and_estate_law_journal/V40/02/2005_aba_rpt_e_journal_v40_no2_summer_master.pdf), (last visited Mar. 9, 2015).

Accordingly, s. 736.0813, F.S., imposes a duty on a Florida trustee to keep the qualified beneficiaries<sup>11</sup> (hereinafter “beneficiaries”) of an irrevocable trust reasonably informed of the trust and its administration. The duty includes, but is not limited to:<sup>12</sup>

- Notice of the existence of the irrevocable trust, the identity of the settlor or settlors, the right to request a copy of the trust instrument, the right to accountings, and applicability of the fiduciary lawyer-client privilege.
- Notice of the acceptance of the trust, the full name and address of the trustee, and the applicability of the fiduciary lawyer-client privilege.
- Disclosure of a copy of the trust instrument upon reasonable request.
- An annual accounting of the trust to each beneficiary and an accounting on termination of the trust or on change of the trustee. The accounting must address the cash and property transactions in the accounting period and what trust assets are currently on hand.<sup>13</sup>
- Disclosure of relevant information about the assets and liabilities of the trust and the particulars relating to administration upon reasonable request.
- Such additional notices and disclosure requirements related to the trust administration as required by the Florida Trust Code.<sup>14</sup>

A beneficiary must bring an action for breach of trust as to any matter adequately disclosed within an accounting or any other written report of the trustee, also known as trust disclosure documents,<sup>15</sup> within 6 months after *receiving* the trust disclosure document or a limitation notice<sup>16</sup> from the trustee that applies to that trust disclosure document, whichever occurs later.<sup>17</sup> A limitation notice informs the beneficiary that an action against the trustee for breach of trust based on any matter adequately disclosed in the trust disclosure document may be barred unless the action is commenced within 6 months.

The code prescribes the permissible methods of sending a document or notice for receipt by a beneficiary.

<sup>11</sup> The term “qualified beneficiary” encompasses only a limited subset of all trust beneficiaries. The class is limited to living persons who are current beneficiaries, intermediate beneficiaries, and first-line remainder beneficiaries, whether vested or contingent. Section 736.0103(16), F.S.

<sup>12</sup> Section 736.0813, F.S.

<sup>13</sup> Sections 736.0813 and 736.08135, F.S.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. Section 736.0108(6), F.S. (notice of a proposed transfer of a trust's principal place of administration); Section 736.04117(4), F.S. (notice of the trustee's exercise of the power to invade the principal of the trust); Section 736.0414(1), F.S. (notice of terminating certain minimally funded trusts); Section 736.0417(1), F.S. (notice prior to combining or dividing trusts); Section 736.0705 (notice of resignation of trustee); Section 736.0802, F.S. (disclose and provide notice of investments in funds owned or controlled by trustee; the identity of the investment instruments, and the identity and relationship to the trustee to any affiliate that owns or controls the investment instruments; and notice to beneficiaries whose share of the trust may be affected by certain legal claims); and Section 736.0902(5), F.S., (notice of the non- application of the prudent investor rule to certain transactions).

<sup>15</sup> “Trust disclosure document” means a trust accounting or any other written report of the trustee. A trust disclosure document adequately discloses a matter if the document provides sufficient information so that a beneficiary knows of a claim or reasonably should have inquired into the existence of a claim with respect to that matter. Section 736.1008(4)(a), F.S.

<sup>16</sup> “Limitation notice” means a written statement of the trustee that an action by a beneficiary against the trustee for breach of trust based on any matter adequately disclosed in a trust disclosure document may be barred unless the action is commenced within 6 months after receipt of the trust disclosure document or receipt of a limitation notice that applies to that trust disclosure document, whichever is later.

<sup>17</sup> Section 736.1008(2), F.S.

## Methods of Disclosure or Notice

Current law requires that notice or sending a document to a person under the code must be accomplished “in a manner reasonably suitable under the circumstances and likely to result in receipt of the notice or document.”<sup>18</sup> However, s. 736.0109, F.S., specifies that the only permissible manners of providing notice, except notice of a judicial proceeding, or sending a document to a person under the code are:

- First-class mail;
- Personal delivery;
- Delivery to the person’s last known place of residence or place of business; or
- A properly directed facsimile or other electronic message.

Notice of a judicial proceeding must be given as provided in the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure.<sup>19</sup>

The current methods of permissible notice or service of documents under the code restrict the ability of trustees to meet increasing beneficiary demands to receive information electronically. Trustees have expressed concern regarding protecting confidential information and the privacy hazards inherent in the delivery of financial information via email.<sup>20</sup> Some trustees, sensitive to these privacy concerns, deliver required documents, such as a trust account statement, to beneficiaries by emailing notice that a trust statement is available to be viewed and downloaded on a secured website or account and providing a password for the beneficiary to access the account.<sup>21</sup> However, it is not clear that by using this method, although more secure than email, the trustee technically complies with the duty to provide a trust accounting under s. 736.0813, F.S., because the document itself is not delivered by email but rather delivers information on how to access the document through a secured website. The failure to provide a trust accounting may be actionable as a breach of trust under the code if a beneficiary denies receipt of statements provided by this method. Further, it is not clear that trust documents posted on a secured website have the benefit of the 6 month limitations period for matters adequately disclosed in trust disclosure documents as they are provided in a manner that may not be permissible under the code. If the limitations period does not apply, a trustee may be subject to a breach of trust claim, even if the matters were adequately disclosed in the trust document, for up to 4 years.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the uncertainty regarding when the limitations period runs for notice or trust disclosure documents delivered by electronic message or posted on a secured website and whether attempts to provide trust disclosure documents through a secured website or account technically comply with the statutory duty to provide certain documents to a beneficiary, trustees have little incentive to respond to beneficiary requests for electronic communications. Prudent trustees that offer electronic delivery of trust disclosure documents via email or through a secured website may find it necessary to continue providing physical documents in order to comply with notice

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<sup>18</sup> Section 736.0109(1), F.S.

<sup>19</sup> Section 736.0109(4), F.S.

<sup>20</sup> Florida Bankers Association, *Subcommittee Report on Electronic Delivery of Trust Statements*, (2015) (on file with the Senate Committee on Judiciary).

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Section 736.1008(1), F.S. provides that the applicable limitations period is determined under ch. 95, F.S. That is, the normal limitations period will be the 4 year period described in s. 95.11(3), F.S.

and disclosure requirements under the code and to secure the protection of the 6 months limitations period for breach of trust claims.

### III. **Effect of Proposed Changes:**

CS/SB 1314 authorizes a trustee to post documents that must be provided to a person under the code to a secure electronic website or account if the person provides written authorization. The website or account must allow the recipient to download or print the posted document. A document provided solely through electronic posting must be retained on the website or account for at least 4 years after the date it is received. The written authorization to provide electronic posting of documents must:

- Be limited solely to posting documents on the electronic account or website.
- Enumerate the documents that may be posted on the electronic website or account.
- Contain specific instructions for accessing the electronic website or account, including any security measures.
- Advise that a separate notice will be sent, and the manner in which it will be sent, when a document is posted to the electronic website or account.
- Advise that the authorization may be amended or revoked at any time and provide instructions to amend or revoke authorization.
- Advise that the posting of a document on the electronic account or website may commence a limitations period as short as 6 months even if the recipient never access the electronic account, website, or document.

The trustee is required to send a notice to a person receiving trust documents by electronic posting, which notice may be made by any permissible method of notice under the code except electronic posting, at the following intervals:

- Each time a document is posted and the notice must identify each document that has been posted and how the person may access the document.
- Every year (the “annual notice”) to advise such persons that posting of a document commences a limitations period as short as 6 months even if the recipient never accesses the website, account, or document. The annual notice must also address the right to amend or revoke a previous authorization to post trust documents on a website or account. The bill provides the suggested form of the annual notice, which is substantially similar to the suggested form of a limitations notice provided in s. 736.1008(4)(c), F.S. The failure of a trustee to provide the annual notice within 380 days after the last notice automatically revokes the person’s authorization to post trust documents on an electronic website or account.

A document delivered by electronic posting is deemed received by the recipient on the earlier of the date that notice of the document’s posting is received or the date that the recipient accesses the document on the electronic account or website. The posting of a document to an electronic account or website is only effective if done in compliance with the requirements of this bill. The trustee has the burden of demonstrating compliance with such requirements. If a trustee provides notice or sends a document to a person by electronic message, notice or sending of the document is complete when sent and presumed received on the date on which it is sent unless the sender has actual knowledge the electronic message did not reach the recipient.

The bill does not preclude the sending of a document by other permissible means under the code nor does it affect or alter the duties of a trustee to keep clear, distinct, and accurate records pursuant to s. 736.0810, F.S., or the time such records must be retained.

The bill specifically delineates that notice and service of documents in a judicial proceeding related to a trust are governed by the Florida Rules of Civil Procedure rather than the code.

This bill takes effect July 1, 2015.

**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.

B. Private Sector Impact:

Trustees may see a reduction in stationary, postage, and labor costs by providing required notices and documents electronically to qualified beneficiaries that opt in to receive electronic notices.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends section 736.0109 of the Florida Statutes.

**IX. Additional Information:**

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**  
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

**CS by Banking and Insurance on March 23, 2015:**

The CS clarifies that the website or account where trust documents are posted must be secure. The CS provides that the annual notice must be provided within 380 days of the last notice.

- B. **Amendments:**

None.