

**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 Environment and Natural Resources

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BILL: SB 840

INTRODUCER: Senator Albritton

SUBJECT: Residential Property Riparian Rights

DATE: January 7, 2022

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

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Collazo	Rogers	EN	<b>Pre-meeting</b>
2.			JU	
3.			RC	

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**I. Summary:**

SB 840 requires land surveyors to give a preference to the prolongation-of-property-line method of establishing the boundaries of a residential property owner’s riparian rights along a channel, unless doing so would result in an inequitable apportionment of the riparian rights at issue. In connection with this preference, the bill defines the terms “channel” and “prolongation-of-property-line method”; limits the scope of the preference to riparian waters only (not littoral waters, such as a lake, an ocean, or a gulf); and provides that the preference only applies when establishing the boundaries of riparian rights after July 1, 2022.

The bill also provides that in a civil action relating to the riparian rights of a residential dock owner, when such rights are exercised with all appropriate environmental and regulatory approvals and permits, the court must award reasonable attorney fees and costs to the defendant if the defendant is the prevailing party.

**II. Present Situation:**

**Riparian Rights Generally**

Riparian rights<sup>1</sup> are rights incident to land bordering upon navigable waters. They are rights of ingress, egress, boating, bathing, and fishing and such others as may be or have been defined by

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, the term “riparian” refers to land abutting nontidal or navigable river waters, and the term “littoral” refers to land abutting navigable ocean, sea, or lake waters. *5F, LLC v. Hawthorne*, 317 So. 3d 220, 222 n.1 (Fla. 2d DCA 2021) and *Walton County v. Stop Beach Renourishment, Inc.*, 998 So. 2d 1102, 1105 n.3 (Fla. 2008), *aff’d sub nom. Stop the Beach Renourishment, Inc. v. Fla. Dep’t of Env’t Prot.*, 560 U.S. 702 (2010). However, the term “riparian” is commonly used to refer to all waterfront owners, so “riparian rights” can be used to refer to rights associated with both riparian and littoral lands. *Id.*

law.<sup>2</sup> Riparian rights benefit the owner of the riparian land, but such rights are attached to the land and are not owned by the land owner. In order for the rights to attach, the land must extend to the ordinary high water mark<sup>3</sup> of the navigable water. Whoever owns or leases the land enjoys the rights, regardless of whether they are mentioned in a deed or lease.<sup>4</sup> Riparian rights may not be taken without just compensation and due process of law.<sup>5</sup> Where a landowner's common-law riparian rights are violated by the acts of another individual, the landowner may bring an action on his or her own behalf.<sup>6</sup>

The state holds title to sovereign submerged lands in trust for public use.<sup>7</sup> The public generally enjoys rights such as bathing, fishing, commerce, and navigation.<sup>8</sup> Upland property owners enjoy these rights in common with the public.<sup>9</sup> Riparian rights are additional, exclusive rights that are held by upland property owners but not the general public.<sup>10</sup> Such rights generally include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Access to and from the water.
- An unobstructed view over the water.
- Reasonable use of the water.
- Accretions and relictions.<sup>11</sup>
- Wharfing out, meaning building structures on the shoreline.<sup>12</sup>

The doctrines of erosion, accretion, and reliction are also riparian rights.<sup>13</sup> When gradual and imperceptible losses or additions to the shoreline occur, the boundary between public and private land (i.e., the mean high-water line)<sup>14</sup> is altered accordingly.<sup>15</sup> Riparian property owners

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<sup>2</sup> Section 253.141(1), F.S. (2021); *see also* *Odom v. Deltona Corp.*, 341 So. 2d 977, 981 (Fla. 1976) (providing that “whether or not a particular area is that of a navigable body of water and thus sovereignty property held in trust [under Article X, Section 11 of the Florida Constitution] is a question of fact and dependent upon whether or not the body of water is permanent in character and, in its ordinary and natural state, is navigable for useful purposes and is of sufficient size and so situated and conditioned that it may be used for purposes common to the public in the locality where it is located); *see also* *Brevard Cty. v. Blasky*, 875 So. 2d 6, 13-14 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004) (explaining that navigability is determined as of 1845, the date Florida became a state).

<sup>3</sup> *Walton County*, 998 So. 2d at 1124 (noting that the “ordinary high water mark is well established as the dividing line between private riparian and sovereign or public ownership of the land beneath the water”); *see also* s. 253.03(8)(b), F.S. (identifying “submerged lands,” for purposes of inventorying public lands, as “publicly owned lands below the ordinary high-water mark of fresh waters and below the mean high-water line of salt waters extending seaward to the outer jurisdiction of the state”); *see also* s. 177.28, F.S. (same).

<sup>4</sup> Section 253.141(1), F.S.

<sup>5</sup> *Broward v. Mabry*, 58 Fla. 398, 410 (1909).

<sup>6</sup> *Harrell v. Hess Oil & Chem. Corp.*, 287 So. 2d 291, 295 (Fla. 1973).

<sup>7</sup> FLA. CONST. art. X, s. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Walton County*, 998 So. 2d at 1110-11.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 1110-11. These special littoral rights are such as are necessary for the use and enjoyment of the upland property, but these rights may not be so exercised as to injure others in their lawful rights. *Id.* at 1111.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *See* Brendan Mackesey, *An Overview of Riparian Rights in Florida*, The Reporter, The Environmental and Land Use Law Section, Vol. XLI, No. 1, 1, 13–16 (2020), available at <https://eluls.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Environmental-and-Land-Use-Law-Section-Reporter-October-2020.pdf> (last visited Nov. 12, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> *Walton County*, 998 So. 2d at 1112-15. “Accretion” is the gradual and imperceptible accumulation of land; “reliction” is an increase of the land by a gradual and imperceptible withdrawal of a waterbody. *Id.* at 1113.

<sup>14</sup> *See* s. 177.28(1), F.S.

<sup>15</sup> *Bd. of Trustees of the Internal Imp. Tr. Fund v. Sand Key Assocs., Ltd.*, 512 So. 2d 934, 936 (Fla. 1987).

automatically take title to dry land added to their property by accretion or reliction.<sup>16</sup> However, under the doctrine of avulsion, following sudden or perceptible loss or addition to the shoreline, the boundary between public and private land remains where it existed before the avulsive event occurred.<sup>17</sup>

### **Establishing Lines of Riparian Rights**

In the 1954 Florida Supreme Court case *Hayes v. Bowman*, opposing parties proposed two different methods for allocating riparian rights: one party argued the lines should extend from the property lines directly into the channel (referred to herein as the “prolongation-of-property-line” method for allocating riparian rights), and the other argued the lines should be drawn at right angles from the thread of the channel to the corners of the property.<sup>18</sup> The Court stated that, based on the nature of upland boundary lines, it is impossible to formulate a geometric rule to govern all cases.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Court prescribed a rule requiring that, based on the factual circumstances presented, the riparian rights of an upland owner must be preserved over an area as near as practicable in the direction of the channel so as to distribute equitably the submerged lands between the upland and the channel.<sup>20</sup> Such equitable distribution must give due consideration to the lay of the upland shore line, the direction of the channel, and the co-relative rights of adjoining upland owners.<sup>21</sup>

The principles established in *Hayes* still apply in Florida today.<sup>22</sup> Courts recognize that land surveyors and other practitioners may use many methods to equitably apportion riparian rights, and no one method is proper or improper.<sup>23</sup> The reasoning for this includes inherent aspects of the uplands to which riparian rights are attached: upland property boundaries intersect the water at almost every different angle, and the thread of a channel is seldom, if ever, parallel to the shoreline of the uplands.<sup>24</sup> Rights are applied based on the shape of the uplands, the shape of the waterbody, and the parties’ relative position to each other.<sup>25</sup>

The use of a particular delineation method may be struck down by a court if the method is found to unfairly impact a party’s riparian rights.<sup>26</sup> In one case, a Florida court reversed a decision of a

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<sup>16</sup> *Stop the Beach Renourishment, Inc. v. Fla. Dep’t of Env’t Prot.*, 560 U.S. 702, 709 (2010); see also *Bd. of Trustees of the Internal Imp. Tr. Fund v. Sand Key Assocs., Ltd.*, 512 So. 2d 934, 938-39 (holding that owners have a right to claim accreted land when the accretion was artificially-caused, as long as the owner did not cause the accretion); see also *New Jersey v. New York*, 523 U.S. 767, 783 (1998) (explaining that an owner may not extend their own property into the water by landfilling or purposefully causing accretion); see also s. 161.051, F.S. (providing that the state will retain title to additions or accretions to the permittee’s property caused by permitted coastal improvements).

<sup>17</sup> *Walton County*, 998 So. 2d at 1114. “Avulsion” is the sudden or perceptible loss of or addition to land by the action of the water or a sudden change in the bed of a lake or the course of a stream. *Id.* at 1116.

<sup>18</sup> *Hayes v. Bowman*, 91 So. 2d 795, 801 (Fla. 1957).

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 801-802.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 802. In the opinion, the Court expressly references the rights of an unobstructed view of the channel and unobstructed means of ingress and egress over the foreshore and tidal waters. *Id.* at 801. The Court states that if the exercise of these rights is prevented, the upland owner is entitled to relief. *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 802.

<sup>22</sup> *Lee Cty. v. Kiesel*, 705 So. 2d 1013, 1015 (Fla. 2d DCA 1998); *Lake Conway Shores Homeowners Ass’n, Inc. v. Driscoll*, 476 So. 2d 1306, 1308 (Fla. 5th DCA 1985).

<sup>23</sup> *Nourachi v. United States*, 655 F. Supp. 2d 1215, 1227 (M.D. Fla. 2009).

<sup>24</sup> *Hayes*, 91 So. 2d at 801-802.

<sup>25</sup> *Johnson v. McCowen*, 348 So. 2d 357, 360 (Fla. 1st DCA 1977).

<sup>26</sup> *Lake Conway Shores Homeowners Ass’n, Inc. v. Driscoll*, 476 So. 2d 1306, 1309-10 (Fla. 5th DCA 1985).

trial judge who used a prolongation-of-property-line method, holding that extending the line of the property boundary in this particular case destroyed an adjacent parcel owner's littoral rights, and remanding for an equitable determination of the parties' respective rights.<sup>27</sup>

The Florida Statutes do not address the methodology for establishing boundaries for riparian rights. The Florida Administrative Code's rules on sovereignty submerged lands generally require all structures and activities to be set back a minimum of 25 feet inside the applicant's riparian rights lines.<sup>28</sup> The rules also require applicants seeking standard leases of sovereignty submerged lands to show the applicant's upland parcel property lines and associated riparian rights lines.<sup>29</sup>

In 2013, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) published general guidelines for the allocation of riparian rights, based on research analyzing existing methods for allocating riparian rights together with a study of different shoreline configurations.<sup>30</sup> Concentrating on the right of ingress and egress to and from the water (including dock construction) and the right to a view over the water – the two riparian rights “equities” of primary interest among owners – the document includes eight conclusions from the research, summarized as follows:

- When docking is the primary issue, the courts will usually apportion the space between the shore and the line of navigability (i.e., the line of deep water).
- For a straighter shore on a large waterbody, the division lines are perpendicular to the direction of the shore extended to the line of navigable water.
- Along a river without a marked channel, lines are usually perpendicular with the stream's thread (i.e., median).
- Along a river or other waterbody with a nearby marked channel and regular shore, the lines are usually perpendicular with the nearest channel edge and not the thread.
- The direction of upland boundaries is largely ignored when apportioning riparian rights (“[t]he public's mistaken belief that riparian lines are on the extension of their side upland lines is the most frequent cause of riparian disputes”).<sup>31</sup> The water body must be equitably apportioned as if all waterfront owners were standing on the shore looking out over the waterbody.
- When the shore is irregular (e.g., coves, bays, lakes, rivers) most courts apportion the line of deep water to divide riparian rights as opposed to any perpendicular method.
- Some situations require apportionment of the entire water surface, and then certain methods are used such as the center point method for lakes.

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.*; see also *Muraca v. Meyerowitz*, 818 N.Y.S.2d 450, 456-57 (Sup. Ct. 2006).

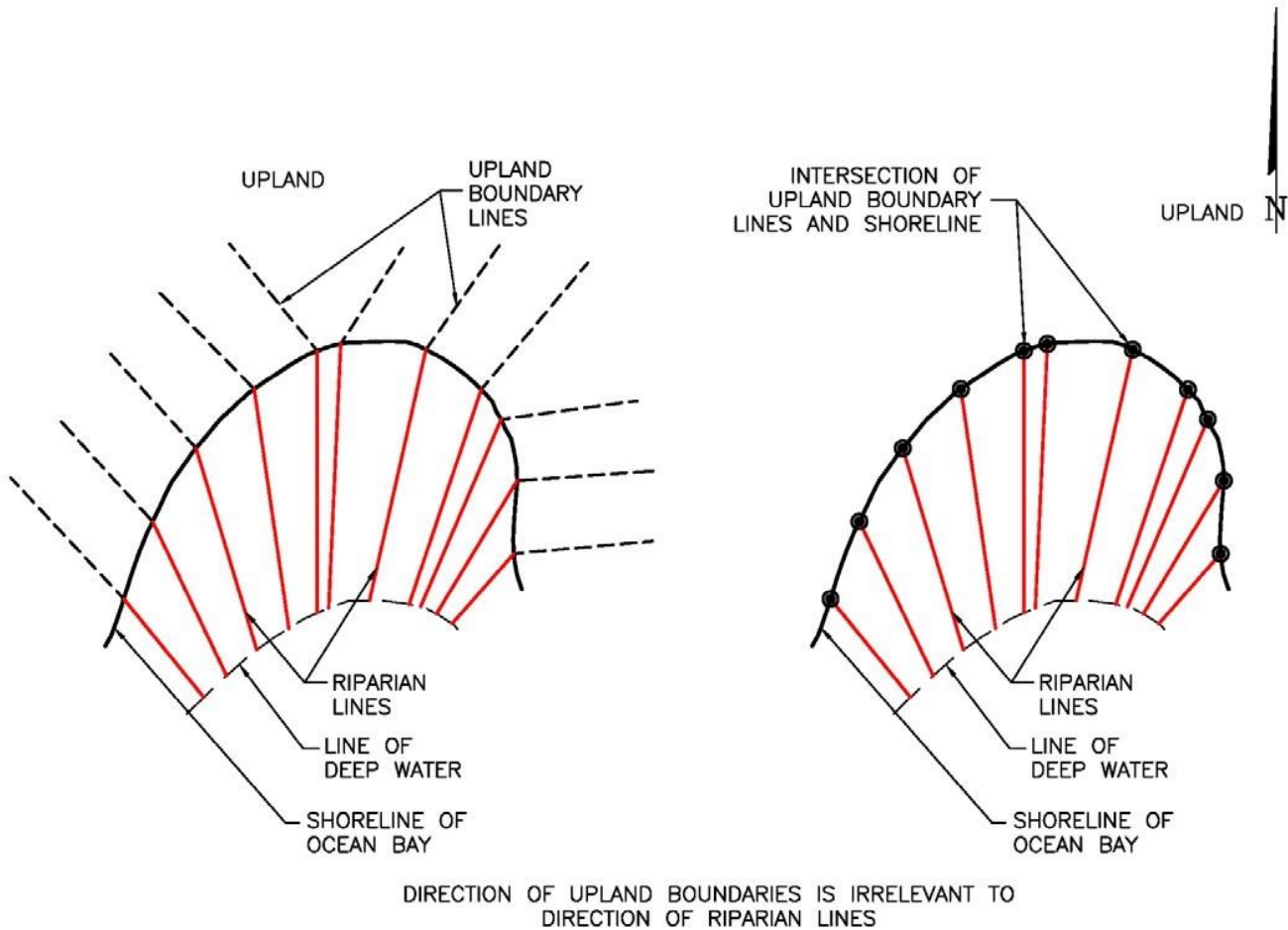
<sup>28</sup> Fla. Admin. Code R. 18-21.004(3)(d) (noting also that the minimum setback is 10 feet for marginal docks, and that other exceptions apply).

<sup>29</sup> Fla. Admin. Code R. 18-21.008(1)(a)4.f.

<sup>30</sup> Florida Dep't of Environmental Protection, SLER 0950, Survey Requirements, *Guidelines for Allocation of Riparian Rights*, 7-18 (2013), available at [https://apps.sfwmd.gov/entsb/docdownload?object\\_id=0900eaea8a95bcd3](https://apps.sfwmd.gov/entsb/docdownload?object_id=0900eaea8a95bcd3) (last visited Nov. 12, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 8. The diagram shows how it is the locations where the upland boundary lines intersect the shoreline (not the direction of the boundary lines landward of the shoreline) that are relevant for apportionment.

- Apportioning the line of deep water is the most universal method, and it gives the same solution as more traditional techniques in many cases and follows dominant national case law where the shore is irregular.<sup>32</sup>



**III. Effect of Proposed Changes:**

The bill amends s. 253.141(1), F.S., to require land surveyors to give preference to the prolongation-of-property-line method of establishing the boundaries of a residential property owner’s riparian rights along a channel. The prolongation-of-property-line method would apply in connection with the construction of docks, piers, marinas, moorings, pilings, and other private improvements, unless doing so would result in an inequitable apportionment of the riparian rights among property owners along the channel.

The bill defines the term “channel” to mean the marked, buoyed, or artificially dredged channel, if any; or if none, a space equal to 20 percent of the average width of the river or stream at the

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 7-9.

point concerned, which furnishes uninterruptedly, through its course, the deepest water at ordinary low water.

The bill defines the term “prolongation-of-property-line method” to mean establishing the boundary of a property owner’s riparian rights by extending the owner’s property line out into the waterbody at the same angles at which they intersect the ordinary high watermark.

This preference does not apply to littoral waters, such as a lake, an ocean, or a gulf; and it only applies when establishing the boundaries of riparian rights after July 1, 2022.

The bill amends s. 253.141(1), F.S., to provide that in a civil action relating to the riparian rights of a residential dock owner, when such rights are exercised with all appropriate environmental and regulatory approvals and permits, in which the defendant is the prevailing party, the court must award reasonable attorney fees and costs to the prevailing party.

The bill reenacts ss. 403.813(1)(s) and s. 403.9323(3), F.S., for the purpose of incorporating the amendments to s. 253.141(1), F.S., into same.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

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

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

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

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill substantially amends s. 253.141 of the Florida Statutes. The bill reenacts ss. 403.813(1)(s) and s. 403.9323(3), F.S.

**IX. Additional Information:**

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

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

None.

B. Amendments:

None.