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Senators Support Teacher, First Responder Tax Breaks

By Jim Turner

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TALLAHASSEE --- A proposal that would expand homestead property-tax exemptions for first responders, teachers and military members is headed to the full Senate amid questions about whether home ownership has gotten beyond the reach of many people in those occupations.

The Senate Appropriations Committee on Monday backed a House proposal (HJR 1 and HB 1563) that would ask voters in November to provide an additional property-tax exemption to classroom teachers, law enforcement officers, correctional officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, child-welfare services professionals, active-duty military members and Florida National Guard members.

Noting the measure doesn't provide down-payment assistance, Sen. Bobby Powell, D-West Palm Beach, called the proposal "well intentioned" but questioned the need for the additional exemption when many people in those professions "already can't afford to live in houses."

"I find it a little bit difficult for me to vote for an additional exemption for those who already own homes, when it's very difficult to get people inside of a home," Powell said.

The real-estate online site Zillow estimates the typical value of a mid-tier home in Florida is \$348,732, which is 28 percent higher than a year ago. In Powell's district, median values range from \$335,548 in Riviera Beach and \$354,396 in West Palm Beach to \$541,210 in Palm Beach Gardens and \$580,148 in Jupiter.

Sen. Jason Brodeur, R-Sanford, said the proposal could make homeownership a reality.

"The thought is that if they can't afford to live in houses, giving them an additional tax exemption may help them be able to afford it," Brodeur said.

Sen. George Gainer, a Panama City Republican who is a former longtime member of the Bay County Commission, voted against the proposal, saying it would cut revenue from local governments.

The Florida Association of Counties has raised concerns it would lead to the tax burden being shifted to renters and businesses.

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The proposal has drawn support from the Florida Sheriffs Association, the Florida Police Benevolent Association and the real-estate industry group Florida Realtors.

Approved by the House last week in a pair of 115-0 votes, the proposal has been a priority of House Speaker Chris Sprowls, R-Palm Harbor. If passed by the Legislature, the increased homestead exemption would need approval from voters because it would be a constitutional amendment.

The proposal would be projected to save \$80.9 million for the targeted property owners next fiscal year, with annual savings growing to \$93.6 million in five years.

Under current law, homeowners can qualify for homestead tax exemptions on the first \$25,000 of the appraised value of property. They also can qualify for \$25,000 homestead exemptions on the value between \$50,000 and \$75,000. Any higher property value is taxable.

Under the proposal, homeowners in the targeted professions could receive an additional \$50,000 exemption, which would apply to the property value between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

The current exemption for the value between \$50,000 and \$75,000 doesn't apply to property taxes collected for school districts, and neither would the proposed legislation.