

Florida Marriage Bill Sparks Controversy

✖ **March 26, 2009** – A Florida bill introduced to “prepare, strengthen and restore” healthy marriages has become a flashpoint of controversy for proposing to raise the cost of obtaining marriage licenses in the state.

The Marriage Education bill-sponsored by Republican Rep. Scott Plakon (pictured) and co-sponsored by Democratic Rep. Darren Soto-would add \$100 to the state’s \$ marriage-license fee, which would be refunded if the couple participates in eight hours of premarital counseling.

Currently under Florida’s 1998 Marriage Preparation Act, \$ of the marriage license fee is refunded if couples participate in four hours of counseling.

Under Plakon’s bill, money from couples who choose not to receive counseling would be deposited into a Marriage Education Trust Fund, which would provide grants for marriage counseling programs.

The bill unanimously passed the state’s Health Care Services Policy Committee on Wednesday, gaining the support of its two Democratic members. It faces three more hearings before going before the state Legislature.

“The most basic building block of our society is families, and we should do everything possible to strengthen them and prepare those who are entering into this very important institution,” Plakon said in after the vote on Wednesday.

But in a string of newspaper editorials, critics have decried the bill, calling it a marriage tax and an inappropriate government intrusion into people’s private lives.

“There’s no argument here that some fools rush into marriage, and then do a quick end-around when ‘happily ever after’ dissolves into irreconcilable differences,” wrote *Orlando Sentinel* columnist George Diaz. “But the deal is, we’re allowed to make those choices without government sticking its nose into our bedrooms.

“If laws can set unreasonable standards for marriage and divorce, what’s the next step? Forcing people to take a pop quiz before they’re allowed to have children?”

But with social programs costing Florida taxpayers roughly \$1.9 billion each year, Plakon said the state has a compelling interest in strengthening marriages and reducing the number of divorces.

“This bill is a small step toward addressing what is a huge financial problem for the state of Florida,” he said. “So many state agencies, a lot of their mission is sort of cleaning up problems created by marriage fragmentation.”

Plakon said he got the idea to introduce the bill after reading *Marriage Savers* by Mike McManus, which helped spawn a national covenant marriage movement. In Clackamas County, Ore., the divorce rate dropped by 15 percent five years after 170 churches banded together to institute Marriage Savers’ community-based program to strengthen marriages in their area.

States such as Georgia, Oklahoma, Maryland, Tennessee and Texas have enacted similar marriage education laws to help reduce divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births. A 2001 Minnesota law has increased the number of couples receiving premarital counseling from 24 percent to 36 percent, the *Sentinel* reported. But most residents would prefer to pay higher fees for a marriage license than take the required 12 hours of counseling.

Many of the bill’s critics have targeted John Stemberger, an Orlando attorney and president of the Florida Family Policy

Council, which successfully mobilized Florida voters to pass a ban on gay marriage last fall.

Stemberger said his support for the marriage education bill stems, in part, from the campaign to pass Amendment 2, which defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman. He said opponents told him that if traditional marriage advocates really wanted to do something about marriage they should reduce the divorce rate.

"The bill is just part of a bigger marriage campaign-to create a marriage movement in Florida, asking the 62 percent of people who voted yes on Amendment 2 to look at our own marriages and our own personal life, the community of marriages within our churches and those marriages within our community," said Stemberger, who also leads Strong Marriages Florida and plans to open 12 community-based marriage programs across the state.

"What can we do to ... minister to people who are coming into an existing marriage relationship? That's the focus of the campaign."

Plakon said he is hopeful his bill will continue to receive bipartisan support. "I'm finding a number of Democrats and Republicans that are identifying the problems that this causes and sees the benefit of strengthening marriages," he said.

He noted that the 1998 law passed by overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate. "We're taking something that was bipartisan and trying to improve it so that it has an even greater impact," Plakon said.