

Union dispute drives debate

By [Molly Moorhead](#), Times Staff Writer

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A bill under consideration in Tallahassee, introduced by state Sen. Mike Fasano, seeks to resolve a long-held point of contention between sheriffs and their deputies unions:

Who has the authority to break an impasse in labor negotiations?

State law deems that the County Commission is the "legislative body" with that ultimate authority.

Fasano's bill, introduced at the request of Pasco County Sheriff Bob White, would make the sheriff — as well as other constitutional officers such as the tax collector or property appraiser — the legislative body.

Fasano calls it a matter of good policy.

"We're talking about (constitutional officers) who are elected by the voters of each county, and I absolutely believe that they should have the final say because they are ultimately accountable for the tax dollars that they spend," Fasano said Friday.

Further, he said, the bill is in keeping with other laws governing organized labor.

"When there's an impasse or there's a problem between labor and the county government, where does labor go? They don't go to the sheriff. They go to their legislative body, the County Commission," Fasano said.

But the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents Pasco's road deputies, calls it a power grab and is lining up for a fight.

"We don't feel the sheriff can be two prongs of a three-prong system of government," said James Preston, state FOP president. "You can't bargain and then rule on your own issues."

That's exactly what White did three years ago, when he and the union came to an impasse over issues of discipline and health insurance for retirees. The union dropped the insurance issue, but appealed to the Public Employees Relations Commission in Tallahassee over the discipline matter. The deputies wanted greater appellate rights while White maintained he should retain final say over demotions of one rank.

Before PERC could rule, White assumed the role of the legislative body and ruled on the contract — in his own favor.

The union cried foul again, alleging an unfair labor practice by White with PERC. The agency last year ruled in favor of the union, and the issue is now the subject of an ongoing court case.

White travelled to Tallahassee last week to show support for Fasano's bill, along with numerous other Florida sheriffs.

He said the bill does not unfairly tilt the balance of power toward him in labor negotiations, but instead empowers him to champion deputies' best interests.

"No one will fight for the deputies in Pasco County harder than me. Period," he said.

"The people elected the sheriff to run his office, and the Constitution lays that out for him; that certain sovereignty of that office," White added. "He ought to be able to operate his office and run his office without that interference."

The bill, titled Senate Bill 610, was approved last week by the Governmental Oversight and Accountability Committee. House Bill 417, its companion, has seen no movement.

Given the adversarial nature of the past four years' negotiations — with still no labor contract in place — Preston said handing legislative authority to the sheriff is simply unfair to the other side.

"We see it as an attempt to frustrate the deputies, intimidate them so they won't be involved in collective bargaining," he said.

"If the sheriff can rule on every impasse, there's no reason to sit at the table."

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