



Alachua County Board of County Commissioners

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December 6, 2021

Email: perry.keith@flsenate.gov
The Honorable Senator Keith Perry
Florida Senate
406 Senate Building
404 South Monroe Street, Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Senator Perry,

At today's meeting the County Commission voted unanimously to oppose the local bill that is the subject of tomorrow's local delegation meeting. Representative Clemons' local bill is a political assault on the Alachua County Home-Rule Charter and our citizens. The bill seeks to create a larger local government that would cost the taxpayers more money and reduce each citizen's representation and voice.

The Alachua County Home-Rule Charter specifies that each of the five County Commissioners lives in one of five districts, and each serves "at large." That means every voter votes for all five County Commissioners, and all five Commissioners are directly accountable to all citizens. As a result, commissioners focus on the good of the County as a whole and are not constantly fighting for scraps to bring home to their districts.

Representative Chuck Clemons (Republican, House District 21) seeks to end this system by creating a ballot referendum that, if passed, would create five single-member districts with each commissioner beholden only to the citizens in their district. The bill would also add two at-large seats creating a seven-member County Commission and creating a larger and more expensive County government. Under Clemons' bill, voter representation would be reduced, as they would only hold accountable three of seven Commissioners.

The motivation is clear, Rep. Clemons' local bill is a thinly veiled attempt to create a single-member gerrymandered County Commission district in 2024, so that he or another candidate from the small but vocal portion of his base can win a commission seat in Alachua County.

State Representatives are subject to 8-year term limits. Many Representatives choose to run for County Commission seats after their terms expire in the state legislature. In fact, according to the Florida Association of Counties, there are currently more county commissioners that were former State Representatives (24) than there are State Representatives that were former County Commissioners (10). Rep. Clemons' term expires in 2024.

In 2020, Rep. Clemons' didn't win the majority of votes in Alachua County. His Democratic opponent won Alachua County by 56.36% to Clemons' 43.64%. However, thanks to the partisan

gerrymandering, Clemons won in Republican-dominated Dixie and Gilchrist counties resulting in a slim 51.09% to 48.91% margin of victory in District 21.

To accomplish this political assault, Rep. Clemons' effort requires a myriad of misdirections and political deceptions. It is a dangerous attempt to interfere in the governance of one of Florida's 20 Home-Rule Charter Counties. The Home-Rule Charter is the equivalent of the County's Constitution. And like changing the United States Constitution, or the State Constitution, changing the Charter through a ballot referendum should not be easy. The Charter establishes three ways for citizens to place referendums on the ballot:

1. Convince the duly elected County Commission to place it on the ballot.
2. Convince the Charter Review Commission, which meets every ten years, to place it on the ballot.
3. Through the petition signature process, motivated citizens can roll up their sleeves and do the work to get 10% of registered voters to sign a petition to place it on the ballot.

A small but vocal far-right group tries to get single-member districts on the ballot year after year. Every time they have failed. They tried to go the petition route about ten years ago, but they could not sign up enough registered voters who liked the idea.

Each time the false narrative is the same. The first common refrain is:

"Those of us in the small cities have no representation."

This is patently false. As mentioned above, the five Commissioners represent all citizens. One need only look at the County's investments and cooperation with the cities to understand that the County cares greatly. Single-member districts are nothing more than an attempt to gerrymander a district that would ensure a far-right conservative is elected. The second common complaint:

"We can't elect a conservative to the Gainesville or County Commissions."

What they mean is that they don't want to do the work to get their candidates elected. It wasn't long ago that a conservative Republican beat a long-established Democrat to win a seat on the County Commission. One of our long-serving Commissioners was considered a conservative democrat. A few years ago, there were three conservatives, including the Mayor on the City of Gainesville Commission. When this group says "can't," they mean "won't," as in they won't do the hard work to get their candidates elected.

The hypocrisy is rich in this situation. The majority party in Tallahassee seems determined to continually put-up roadblocks to citizen-led efforts to amend the State Constitution through ballot referendums. It is an enormously complicated, expensive, and arduous process. And yet Rep. Clemons, with a wave of his hand, wants to give this small portion of his "base" a pass on doing any hard work when it comes to the County's Charter amendment process. This cavalier attitude and approach are both disappointing and unbecoming of a state representative.

Some, including Rep. Clemons, will try to deflect criticism by saying, "Well, let's put it on the ballot and let the voters decide." While we feel sure voters will reject this political power grab, it will require a long and time-consuming education campaign to counter the misinformation that will surely follow if this bill passes. This bill will be an energy-sucking distraction from the important projects the County Commission has underway.

A sampling of these projects include:

- We have committed to a new road pavement management plan and are hoping to budget \$15 million in new funding annually.
- We are investing \$30 million in building the new Sports Event Center that will have an enormous economic impact through job creation, visitor revenue, and hotel stays.
- We have committed \$15 million in American Rescue Plan Act dollars to provide countywide Broadband access in the rural areas and an additional \$6 million to address Affordable Housing.
- We have committed \$8 million in funding for a new Public Safety Trunk Radio system to serve rural areas better.
- We are providing Gas Tax revenue and Wild Spaces Public Places dollars to the small cities at a rate higher than the state revenue sharing model requires
- In Newberry, we have made massive investments in the Champions Park ball fields, the Agricultural and Equestrian Center, the Alachua County/UF IFAS offices and auditorium, and hope to bring a meat processing plant to the area.
- We have made significant investments in the Legacy Park project in the City of Alachua.
- We are cooperating with several Cities in their Community Redevelopment efforts.
- We are committed to assisting all of our cities with their legislative efforts.
- We have committed to a new Animal Services Facility to serve the entire County better.
- We recently held an all-cities summit and had an optimistic and positive discussion about future cooperation. Though invited, Rep. Clemons did not attend.

In addition, the County Commission has lowered the millage rate each of the last five years. Two of those years, we have gone all the way to the roll-back rate. We have been excellent stewards of taxpayer dollars and have been the lead agency in the pandemic response for almost two years, working closely with state, local, and non-profit agencies.

All of this begs the fundamental questions: Exactly who is Rep. Clemons serving, what is the "problem" he is seeking to "fix," and why is this "fix" only needed in Alachua County (Democrat majority) and not in Dixie and Gilchrist Counties (Republican majorities). Those counties mirror Alachua County's five "at large" commissioner system.

We suggest that, instead of this blatant attempt to play politics with the Alachua County Home-Rule Charter, to the benefit of him or another candidate, that Rep. Clemons instead focus on the many challenges in State Government that need his attention.

Sincerely,



Ken Cornell
Alachua County Commission

xc: Board of County Commissioners
Michele L. Lieberman, County Manager
Sylvia Torres, County Attorney
Mark Sexton, Communications and Legislative Affairs Director
The Honorable Chuck Brannan
The Honorable Chuck Clemons
The Honorable Yvonne Hinson-Rawls
Gainesville City Commission