



Stabilized judicial funding will ensure order in Florida's courts

Access to the courts is regarded as one of the most fundamental rights. The ability of our judicial system to deliver swift and efficient justice will suffer if Florida courts continue to face substantial budget cuts year after year.

Florida courts currently handle an average of 4 million cases a year. In recent years, our courts have sustained repeated cuts to their budget.

Florida courts were impacted by significant cuts last year. Additional budget cuts this year would result in significant delays in our civil justice system and at worst mean some of our courts will eventually be forced to close their doors as a result of the repeated cuts and the rising number of cases clogging courts.

The ability of Florida's courts to operate efficiently will not have to be drastically disrupted if the Legislature ensures that our court system remains well-funded. One alternative to providing better funding for the judiciary is to make sure court fees are placed in a trust fund dedicated to funding the judiciary.

Although the state faces a very bleak budget situation, lawmakers have an opportunity – without new tax dollars – to establish a stable funding source for Florida courts that is derived from the user fees that support the courts function.

While Florida's citizens pay fees to access the courts – filing fees, fees for service of process, processing fees and many others – these fees flow outside of the court system and into the state's general revenue fund. This means fees paid by citizens to access the state's courts are not dedicated to sustaining the efficient operation of Florida's courts.

Ensuring there is a dedicated funding source for Florida's court system will ensure the judiciary remains strong and citizens' access to justice is not hampered when our state is facing economic distress.

During the special session to address the state's budget shortfalls, the Senate has taken this into consideration and is proposing returning \$47 million to the courts budget. The Senate's proposal ensures that court fees are put into a designated trust fund that can only be used for court funding rather than allowing the money collected from court filings to be put into the general revenue pot without any guarantee the money will actually be used for court funding.

Just as the money Floridians pay on any of the toll roads in the state is dedicated to maintaining and improving the quality of those roads, the fees that Floridians pay to access our court system should be utilized to pay for the ability of our courts to function efficiently.