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Gov. Scott vetoes alimony bill, but debate not over

Photos



By Ray Reyes | Tribune Staff
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The debate over alimony changes likely will rage again during the next legislative session after Gov. Rick Scott vetoed a bill late Wednesday that would have ended permanent alimony in Florida.

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Scott's veto came only four hours before a midnight deadline after which the legislation would have become law with or without his signature.

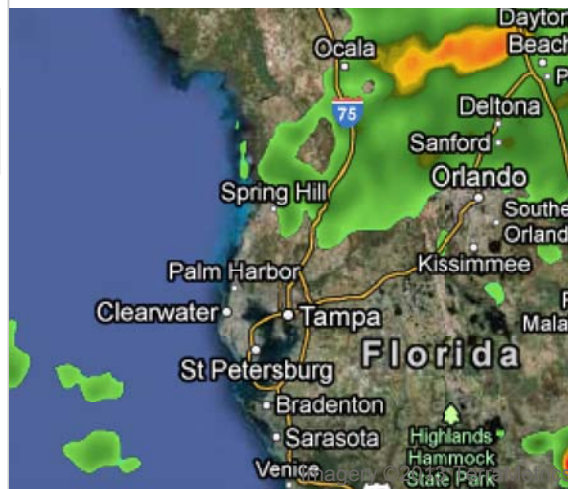
"It's very disheartening right now," said Alan Frisher, a divorce financial analyst who lobbied for alimony change. "We're exploring what options we have in future sessions. At the very least we raised awareness on the topic."

In a letter to state Senate President Don Gaetz, Scott said he could not support the legislation because "it applies retroactively and thus tampers with the settled economic expectations of many Floridians who have

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experienced divorce.”

Senate Bill 718 would have made it harder to get alimony in short-term marriages and prevented alimony payments from lasting longer than half the length of the marriage.

The bill also would have required judges to give divorced parents equal custody of their children, absent extraordinary circumstances.

Scott said he saw “several forward-looking elements of this bill” and that the legislation sought to “modernize Florida's alimony system by leveling the playing field in divorce proceedings.”

But Scott wrote in his veto message that he didn't agree with how the proposed law would be applied retroactively to divorcees and families.

“The retroactive adjustment of alimony could result in unfair, unanticipated results,” Scott wrote. “Current Florida law already provides for the adjustment of alimony under the proper circumstances.

“The law also ensures that spouses who have sacrificed their careers to raise a family do not suffer financial catastrophe upon divorce and that the lower-earning spouse and stay-at-home parent will not be financially punished.”

Scott concluded the letter to Gaetz by saying, “Floridians have relied on this system post-divorce and planned their lives accordingly.”

Proponents of the bill had argued change is needed to help divorcees move on and release them from their ex-spouses. On Wednesday, the bill's backers said they were disappointed and are looking ahead to next year's legislative session.

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Terry Power, a divorcee whose ex-wife had asked for \$20,000 a month, said lifetime alimony needs to end.

“There was an outpouring of support in favor of changing these outdated laws,” said Power, an administrator for a national retirement plan based in Clearwater.

Power said he thinks Scott was thinking of his re-election campaign and vetoed the bill in an attempt to court the women's vote.

Opponents of alimony change said the bill would affect the state's women and children financially and that the proposed law took away the discretion of judges.

Cathy Jones, a divorcee from Lakeland, said the reform bill was “hastily crafted legislation.”

“This bill had nothing to do with the welfare of Florida's women and children,” Jones said. “I'm so proud of Gov. Rick Scott for listening to women.”

Jan Killilea, a member of a group opposed to the legislation, said had Scott signed the bill, the law would have caused some women currently receiving alimony to fall below the poverty level.

Killilea, whose Palm Beach-based organization, First Wives First, started lobbying lawmakers in December, said Scott was thinking of the state's women and children, not politics.

“He listened to the legitimate concerns of the minority,” Killilea said.

Although Scott vetoed the bill, that doesn't mean the fight is over, said Mark Sessums, a Lakeland lawyer opposed to alimony changes.

The bill's proponents will likely be back in Tallahassee next year pushing for changes, he said.

“I don't think this bill will ever go away,” Sessums said. “I think it's going to be a year-by-year struggle.”

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