

In Florida's Special Districts, Small Government Delivers Big Benefits for Citizens

By Chris Lyon ▪ March 15, 2021



Across the state of Florida, citizens rely on a lesser-known form of local government called a “special district” to provide services essential to their health and quality of life—everything from firefighting and hospital care to water management and mosquito control.

In fact, every parcel of land in Florida is covered by at least one of the state's more than 1,700 special districts.

In this year's session of the state legislature, House Speaker Chris Sprowls and other lawmakers have promised a close look at special districts to assess how well they are carrying out their responsibilities.

Based on my experience over the last 17 years working closely with special districts in Florida, I believe this legislative scrutiny will reveal an important success story: that these generally small entities already meet or exceed the standards of efficiency, accountability and transparency expected of good government.

Special districts are created for a narrow purpose within a limited geographic area. They do not have “home rule” authority like cities and counties and can only expend revenue on those services or infrastructure authorized by their enabling legislation.

Special districts don't have “mission creep” and remain laser-focused on the service they are charged with providing. Because of this limited purpose and scope, special districts operate with lower administrative expense than other forms of local government to produce the levels of quality and service required by their citizen customers.

A basic premise of special districts is that only the people who receive the service pay for it. For example, when residents or property owners agree to create an independent special district (typically to provide infrastructure or services that a city or county is unable or unwilling to provide), those citizens agree to pay for that service, whether through taxes, assessments or fees.

All special districts in Florida are fully accountable.

The vast majority (85 percent) of independent districts are directly accountable to their constituents because their governing boards are elected by the residents they serve. The remainder have their governing board members appointed, primarily by the Governor, and those members are accountable to that appointing official.

Districts that operate under the control of a city or county are accountable to those local governments.

Because special districts operate so close to their grassroots constituents in a generally small geographic area, they have a built-in incentive to be both accountable and responsive. For example, in a special fire district, governing board members must live within the boundaries of that district and pay the same taxes their constituents pay. Residents and their board members are literally neighbors.

In contrast, in a large city or county, a resident's councilperson or commissioner might live a 20-minute drive away.

Special districts meet or exceed all of the transparency measures that are required of cities and counties, including Florida's public records law, public meeting laws, ethics code and financial reporting requirements.

Special districts must conduct an annual financial audit and post financial results on their website, in addition to financial oversight by the state. For Florida residents, the transparency tools are in place to follow what is happening with special districts in their area and to make their needs and opinions known.

I believe Florida's special districts would welcome the opportunity to work with Speaker Sprowls and the legislature to ensure that districts are continually improving the ways they engage and serve their constituents. As a small government success story, special districts must continue to play their essential role in Florida's quality of life.

As the familiar quote attributed to Thomas Jefferson says so well, "The government closest to the people serves the people best."

Chris Lyon is a shareholder and attorney/lobbyist with the law firm Lewis, Longman & Walker P.A. Based in Tallahassee, he has represented the Florida Association of Special Districts (FASD) as well as individual districts over the last 17 years. FASD is the voluntary statewide association that provides education and advocacy for special districts.

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