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Joe Gruters focused on preserving Florida's superior business environment

E-Fairness, E-Verify top priorities for Senate Commerce and Tourism chair.

By Jacob Ogles | January 13, 2020

Joe Gruters often finds himself in the headlines for his work as Republican Party of Florida chair. But right now, his focus will turn to lawmaking, where the tough part of the job may be moving stalwart conservatives.

The chair of the Senate Commerce and Tourism Committee will take on some big lifts this year. He hopes to convince colleagues Florida should start assessing online sales taxes, holding polluters more accountable for sewage spills and funding VISIT FLORIDA.

“We still have an economy based on tourism,” Gruters said. That’s likely to be one of the big fights of the session, with House Speaker Jose Oliva making clear he thinks VISIT FLORIDA is a waste of money.

But chairing a committee focused on tourism, Gruters stands with tourism leaders across the state in supporting Florida’s de facto tourism agency’s continued existence.

“At end of day when we have a limited budget, everything becomes competitive,” the Sarasota Republican said.

Of course, he also said there are ways the state can start improving its revenue stream. He filed a new e-fairness bill in August (SB 126), and unlike last year’s attempt to start charging state sales tax at point of sale, it won’t be revenue-neutral this time.

That means the change could result in \$750 million in recurring revenue for the state.

The legislation stands as one of Gruters’ top legislative priorities in 2020. And he’s refining his arguments to convince lawmakers of all philosophies why Florida needs to charge a tax, one that citizens technically are supposed to pay at the end of the year when they file their income taxes. He calls including the tax with transactions a convenience for the taxpayer and a way to make sure online retailers don’t have an unfair advantage.

“It definitely has a better chance this year,” Gruters said. “I just don’t want to help out and reward foreign retailers on backs on local main street mom and pop stores.”

One of his other top priorities may be more palatable to staunch conservatives— e-verify. With Sen. Tom Lee, a Thonotosassa Republican, Gruters co-introduced a requirement for employers to check immigration status and hiring eligibility (SB 664).

Representing a coastal community, Gruters remains a vocal proponent of stricter enforcement of water protections. He has sponsored legislation that will increase fines on publicly owned utilities that pollute water through sewage spills.

He has less control over appropriations but will push this year to keep the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust fully funded. He’s not especially confident on that.

“It’s probably unlikely, but it doesn’t mean it can’t happen,” he said. “A lot of people want to see it happen.”

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And many fiscal hawk organizations like Florida TaxWatch have endorsed the bulk of Gruters' 2020 agenda.

“My job is to try and make sure Florida is the best possible place to do business in the country, and help push legislation that will continue to drive that message in the overall environment,” he said.

“Florida is already No. 1 and we want to maintain that superiority. We attract 1,000 plus a day here, and we need to provide good jobs.”

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