

College sales tax gains support in House

By Kathleen McGrory

[Herald/Times Tallahassee bureau](#)

A bill that would allow Miami-Dade County to levy a half-penny sales tax to support two of South Florida's biggest schools — Miami Dade College and Florida International University — is getting strong traction in the Florida Legislature, thanks to the lobbying of local lawmakers.

On Wednesday, the bill (HB 113) got the nod of another House committee. Three different committees have now approved the measure. The bill's next stop: the House floor for a vote.

"The state does not have the ability to keep up with the needs of students coming into Miami Dade College and Florida International University," said state Rep. Erik Fresen, the Miami Republican who is sponsoring the bill. "This is a way to help them with construction, retrofitting and deferred maintenance."

The sales tax would have to be approved by voters, and would last for only five years.

It has the potential to raise as much as \$224 million in annual revenue, according to a state policy analysis.

Of the total, 90 percent of the revenue would go to construction and deferred maintenance at Miami Dade College. The remaining 10 percent would be earmarked for "the operation, maintenance, land acquisition, and administration" of Florida International University.

An independent board would provide oversight.

The bill is a top priority for Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón.

"The college has grown, while keeping tuition low," Padrón said. "But major infrastructure and technology improvements are needed to ensure that Miami Dade College meets the challenges of a 21st century economy."

Not all members of the Miami-Dade delegation support the policy.

"Miami Dade College is absolutely deserving of money to fix their buildings" said state Rep. Carlos Trujillo, R-Miami. "But \$1.1 billion is excessive. There's no plan on how to spend the money. And I have no faith in the oversight that will be provided by a board of volunteers."

A similar bill passed out of the Senate last year. But as the session wound to a close, it was never heard on the House floor.

Fresen blamed House Democrats, who demanded that every bill be read in full for nearly two days. The move was meant to protest House Speaker Will Weatherford's refusal to accept federal money for healthcare reform.

"If that hadn't happened, [the proposal] would have made it to the floor and it would have passed," Fresen said.

This year will be different, he said.

The Senate version has already won the support of two committees.

Sen. Anitere Flores, the Miami Republican and bill sponsor, said she believes the third and final committee hearing will take place in early March.

"This is a great opportunity for our community to come together, and give another vote of confidence to an institution like Miami Dade College," she said.

Fresen said he filed the House bill early, enabling it to sail through its committee stops.

In the House Appropriations Committee, its final stop, only two members voted against the proposal: Rep. Richard Corcoran, R-Land O' Lakes, and Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota.

After the vote, Padrón said he was hopeful about the bill's chances.

"Our efforts this legislative session are all about giving the people of Miami-Dade County a say in the future of our college," he said. "That's democracy at work."