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State senators ready for a drilling from oil lobby

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TALLAHASSEE — The aggressive push for oil drilling off Florida's shores is backed by a coalition of powerful, well-financed business interests who are determined to succeed where they failed before: the state Senate.

But even as proponents insist they'll corral the votes they need, Senate skeptics are multiplying — including the chamber's presiding officer and several key Republicans who sound increasingly hostile to the idea.

Senate President Jeff Atwater, who's running statewide for chief financial officer, is not convinced that Floridians increasingly support drilling. Moreover, he says the issue is not on his priority list for 2010.

"The oil drilling matter is not on the Senate agenda for the coming session," Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, said flatly.

Beyond Atwater's lack of enthusiasm, several veteran Republican senators — some representing beachfront districts — are on record as saying they would not vote for a drilling bill. They include Sens. Victor Crist, R-Tampa; Dennis Jones, R-Seminole; Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland; and Durell Peaden, R-Crestview.

"Once you ruin those pristine beaches, they're ruined forever," said Peaden, a retired doctor who worked for Texaco before he went to medical school. He describes out-of-state oilmen as "shysters" promoting a "shell game" at the expense of Florida's tourism economy.

"It's all about campaign money," Peaden said. "And it's one big crapshoot."

Another coastal senator is Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton. He says he is open to learning more about drilling but would vote no, "knowing what I know now."

"I don't think the Senate has the votes right now," said Bennett.

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In the 40-member Senate, 21 votes are required to pass a bill. With the chamber comprising 26 Republicans and 14 Democrats, the Republican opposition does not necessarily mean the issue's death knell.

Still, pro-drilling forces are expected to channel their influence in the direction of seven African-American senators, all Democrats including Tampa's Arthenia Joyner and Miami's Larcenia Bullard, who have not staked out public positions on the subject.

"I believe we will find the votes in the House and the Senate and in a bipartisan way," said David Rancourt, lead lobbyist for Florida Energy Associates, the main group seeking to overturn Florida's drilling ban.

Florida Energy Associates is working with a consortium of out-of-state oil interests seeking to drill for oil and gas off the coast

of the Florida Panhandle, and they have the backing of leading business groups such as Associated Industries of Florida. There is no bill filed for the coming session, but last spring's failed idea — unveiled in the final days of the 2009 legislative session — proposed giving the governor and Cabinet the authority to accept bids from oil companies interested in drilling as close as 3 miles from the Florida coast.

The House voted 70-43 along mostly party lines to repeal the drilling ban, but the Senate did not consider the bill, saying the House was trying to move too fast on a complex issue with major implications.

Now the Senate has a champion: Sen. Mike Haridopolos, the Space Coast Republican who is poised to become Senate president a year from now.

"I'm not going to pretend everyone is on board," said Haridopolos, R-Indian River. "Whoever is saying what they say now, that might change. The facts will take us where we need to go. I'm in no rush to judgment."

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Haridopolos' likely successor to the Senate presidency in 2012 is Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, who represents a conservative Panhandle district of about 430,000 people. Many of his constituents have ties to the region's five sprawling military bases, including the enormous Eglin Air Force Base. His district also includes the so-called Emerald Coast beaches in Seaside and Destin, big lures for tourists.

Gaetz said he has emphasized to Haridopolos and the leader of the pro-drilling forces in the House, Rep. Dean Cannon, "that the economy of Northwest Florida is based on our military mission. Therefore, any proposal has to be viewed in the context of the effect on our military bases."

"My first phone calls, when I see a bill, will be to the commanders of the five military bases in my region," Gaetz said. "And my question will be, 'Is this bill with these specific provisions compatible or incompatible with the military?' Their answers will drive my vote." The senator said military officials have told him that low-flying planes are "incompatible" with oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico.

Other Republicans worry about the implications for the Sunshine State economy.

Jones, whose district encompasses several Pinellas beachfront communities, said drilling would wreak havoc on the county's tourism industry. Sen. Crist, who grew up in New Orleans, remembers pulling tar balls off his feet as a child. Dockery, who is considering running for governor, successfully led the Senate opposition to a Central Florida commuter rail project last spring — and appears poised to fight just as hard against drilling.

Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, who represents most of coastal Sarasota County, is undecided and says the public attitude toward drilling is changing in her district.

"I'm shocked at how many people in Sarasota County support drilling," she said. "We should be a 'no.' We're not. We are a split county."

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The man who could really steer the drilling debate is Atwater. As Senate president, he alone determines which committees hear which bills and when. He has the power to keep a bill off the agenda entirely, or fast-track it for consideration by the full Senate.

He promises that in addition to Senate consideration, he will recruit an independent third party, like a think tank or a university, to provide a fact-based analysis of the pros and cons of offshore drilling.

"It will be looked at in the most independent manner possible," said Atwater, who is openly skeptical of pro-drilling forces' polls showing widespread public support.

In July 2008, a Quinnipiac University poll surveyed 1,248 Florida voters and found that 60 percent of Floridians supported offshore drilling while 36 percent opposed and 4 percent had no opinion. The margin of error was 2.8 percent. Other recent polls show growing support for drilling, but they were commissioned by oil interests.

"In all polling, it can be a manner in which the questions may be asked," Atwater said. "I don't accept, at the moment, that there is extraordinary public opinion one way or the other pressing this matter, and I think that would be the wrong reason to advance an idea."

Gaetz acknowledged the significant power, money and influence pushing the drilling issue forward in an election year, when many legislators will be hungry for campaign contributions. Florida Energy Associates has hired nearly three dozen lobbyists and enlisted a well-known pollster, Hank Fishkind, and a leading public relations firm, Ron Sachs Communications, to press its case in the state Capitol.

"This is the 82nd Airborne politics dropping in on this issue," Gaetz said. "There is a lot of power behind this."

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Voices against drilling

What key Republican senators are saying about a proposal to lift Florida's offshore oil drilling moratorium:

Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, 51, candidate for chief financial officer: "The oil drilling matter is not on the Senate agenda for the coming session."

Sen. Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, 68, member of the Senate Policy and Steering Committee on Commerce and Industry: "It's an absolutely dirty industry. They use chromium, arsenic, barium, and it's going to change the color of the sand."

Sen. Durell Peaden, R-Crestview, 64, who represents the beachfront communities of Okaloosa and Santa Rosa counties, including Destin and Seaside: "It looks like Texas is trying to come in here with a bunch of lobbyists to sell us a bill of goods."

Sen. Victor Crist, R-Tampa, 52, who grew up in New Orleans and whose father was a grass roots activist on the preservation of the beachfront in Pinellas County: "Somebody has to show me how this would benefit Florida. Where's the benefit?"