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[Obituaries](#)

[Legals](#)

[Classifieds](#)

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### County tables bid to dun bad drivers

By Ryan Smith, News-Leader

The Nassau County Commission tabled indefinitely Monday a proposed ordinance that would allow the county to bill insurance companies or individuals for fire-rescue response to traffic accidents.

Commissioner Danny Leeper expressed doubt about the ordinance, saying he worried about the county's ability to collect and the "public relations nightmare" that could result if the ordinance passed.

"From the beginning, I've had reservations about it, and I still have some reservations about it," he said.

State Farm Insurance agent Roy Byrd of Fernandina Beach also spoke against the proposal. "If this does go through, it will probably end up being passed along to the customers in the form of a rate increase," he said. "And who's going to determine fault in the accident? The law enforcement officer? ... A law enforcement officer is there to determine if anyone broke the law. He's not to determine fault."

"If someone runs a red light and causes an accident, the police officer can't say he's at fault?" said Commission Chair Barry Holloway.

"Sure, he can do that," Byrd said. "But it's not always that cut and dried."

The ordinance would provide for billing the insurance companies of at-fault drivers for costs associated with responding to traffic accidents. If the insurance company of a Nassau County resident declined to pay, the matter would be dropped. However, nonresidents could be billed directly if their insurance carriers didn't pay the claim. Therein lies the problem, according to Leeper. "Isn't that discrimination?" he said.

"No, because our taxpayers are bearing the burden for nonresidents," Commissioner Stacy Johnson said.

"My feeling is that nonresidents might be here to visit family," Leeper said. "They stay in our hotels and eat in our restaurants."

Commissioner Mike Boyle agreed. "I don't think we want to send a message to tourists that we're going to go after them harder than residents," he said. "While we need to be creative in finding new sources of revenue, we need to do so in a way that doesn't hammer anyone."

"I just think we're not ready for this," Leeper said. "I'd like to see it brought back at a later date." He cited several examples of municipalities throughout the country that had passed similar ordinances, only to repeal them in the face of overwhelming public outcry.

Regina Moore, president of Cost Recovery Corp., the company that would handle billing for the county in the event the ordinance passed, defended the proposal. "It's not as if every tourist coming into Nassau County that gets into an accident is going to be billed," she said. "... It's not solving your issues budget-wise, but it is being responsible

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Leeper insisted that more research needed to be done before moving ahead. "I think there's too many unanswered questions, and I think this board needs to do its own due diligence," he said. "I don't think this is right for Nassau County."

Leeper moved to table the proposal indefinitely. The motion passed 3-2, with Holloway and Johnson voting nay.

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**Story created Feb 12, 2009 - 13:16:54 PST.**

**Inside this section:**

[Wednesday, February 11, 2009 Edition](#)

[ACLU sues local schools](#)

[County tables bid to dun bad drivers](#)

[FPU's latest shock: Surging deposits](#)

[Rec center building needs floodproofing](#)

[Politician takes up golf](#)

[6 months in jail for child porn](#)

[3 dogs rescued from house fire in Yulee](#)

[Long delayed murder trial set for June](#)

[Flash Foods gouged gas customers](#)

[LOOKING BACK](#)

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[Back to Index](#)

[Printer Friendly Version](#)