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Kottkamp: Mines are a local matter

Lt. governor says Lee officials' argument valid

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TALLAHASSEE — The decision to approve or deny mine applications should remain under local control, says the Florida's second-in-command.

"It is a local issue," Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp said Wednesday.

He met with Lee County officials and told them that state and local government need to work together.

But three bills floating through the Legislature could strip local control over mines, or at least limit control. And Lee officials fear losing their ability to enforce a plan that could allow mining, but protect the county's drinking water supply, which is in an area that also is one of only six regions of the state that provide the rock needed for roads.

"We need to facilitate better communication," Commissioner Tammy Hall said.

The mining interests have hired lobbyist Brian Ballard to fight for them. Ballard is the finance co-chairman for U.S. Sen. John McCain's presidential run, and Ballard's clients include the New York Yankees, Allstate Insurance Co. and the Florida Association of Counties.

But county officials seem to be winning the fight so far, especially after their meeting with Kottkamp.

One of the bills in the Senate - SB 2406, which would give the Legislature control over mining decisions - has yet to have a committee hearing. The other - SB 774, which would force local governments to make a decision on mining applications within three months or the governor and Cabinet would decide - passed the Senate's Transportation Committee with a 5-3 vote, and has not gone anywhere since.

"You can't have the big counties pushing the burden to the small counties," said Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton.

Bennett, whose district includes part of Lee County, sponsored SB 2406. A good example of the small counties he is referring to are in the sparsely populated Big Bend area, one of the six regions that provides rock for roads.

In the House, Trudi Williams, R-Lee County, chairs the committee that has sponsored another proposal that missed a house council hearing Wednesday.

Commissioner Frank Mann told Kottkamp that the county would be fair to miners, that the moratorium on new mines in the area was passed only so the county could finish a study on the area that they hope will allow for a balance of all interests.

"We're trying to get our arms around this, see what we'll do for the next 50 years," Mann said.

"We have not (tread) on anybody's rights. We believe we'll have rules and regulations that will allow for safe mining" and not harm drinking water supply.
