

## **GOP rift widens over Florida's pill mill database**

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By Brandon Larrabee

TALLAHASSEE — A rift among Republicans over the fate of a prescription-drug database appears to be deepening, with a key House lawmaker suggesting he was ready to stop the list the day after the Senate President Mike Haridopolos made his strongest statement yet in its defense.

Gov. Rick Scott has proposed canceling the database, which would initially be funded with federal and private money. The project has been stalled because of a bidding dispute. But supporters say the state should move ahead — even if taxpayers eventually have to pick up the bill — as part of a broad-based effort to crack down on “pill mills,” or doctors and pain clinics that dole out powerful and addictive painkillers and are blamed for a growing drug epidemic.

On Thursday, Health and Human Services Chairman Robert Schenck, R-Spring Hill, said the database won't work.

“It forfeits people's privacy for a reason that's not solving a bigger problem, and I think there are better ways to do that,” Schenck said.

Instead, Schenck said he would propose legislation that would address the issue of prescription-drug abuse during the first week of the upcoming legislative session, which begins March 8. Schenck offered few specifics, but suggested when asked that a repeal of the database law could be in the offing either as part of that measure or as a separate bill.

“My No. 1 priority first is to solve the problem for all Floridians,” Schenck said. “And if we can adequately solve it, then we will definitely be looking at repealing ... other former laws that do not solve the problem and have not helped solve the problem.”

House Majority Leader Carlos Lopez-Cantera, R-Miami, signaled his support in a statement issued Thursday.

“We must work to prevent bad doctors from dispensing indefensible amounts of dangerous medical drugs, not utilize another big government program to penalize citizens for the legal use of prescription drugs,” Lopez-Cantera said.

Supporters of the database said they were angered with the efforts to close down the prescription-tracking program and unconvinced by Schenck's contention that the projects haven't worked when they've been tried elsewhere.

“What I do know is that the people in some of the states that have the database are coming to our state to get their drugs,” said Karen Perry, executive director of the Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education Task Force, which supports the database. “So what does that say?”

Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, has become perhaps the highest-profile defender of the database, and he reiterated Wednesday that he wanted the project to continue. The Senate's health budget chief opposes the program, but Haridopolos appears to have only dug in.

"We will get this funded because it's a major problem," he said. "It is destroying people's lives. ... If it takes private money or public money, we should pay for it and we should eradicate this out of Florida."

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