

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STAFF ANALYSIS

BILL #: CS/HB 203 Residential Properties
SPONSOR(S): Civil Justice Subcommittee; Wood
TIED BILLS: None **IDEN./SIM. BILLS:** SB 722

REFERENCE	ACTION	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR or BUDGET/POLICY CHIEF
1) Civil Justice Subcommittee	11 Y, 2 N, As CS	Robinson	Bond
2) Business & Professions Subcommittee			
3) Judiciary Committee			

SUMMARY ANALYSIS

An estoppel certificate is a legal document issued by a homeowners', cooperative, or condominium association (collectively referred to herein as "association") which certifies the total debt owed to the association for unpaid financial obligations of a parcel owner or unit owner.

The bill:

- provides for the ability to request and deliver estoppel certificates through electronic means;
- reduces the period of time in which an association must respond to an estoppel certificate request;
- specifies the required content, effective periods, and approved delivery methods for estoppel certificates;
- establishes fee caps for the preparation and delivery of an estoppel certificate;
- requires that the estoppel certificate fee be paid from closing or settlement proceeds from the sale or refinance of a home under certain circumstances;
- waives the right of an association to collect moneys owed in excess of the amount stated in an estoppel certificate from any person who in good faith relies on such certificate; and
- provides that cooperative associations are subject to the same requirements regarding the issuance of estoppel certificates as homeowner and condominium associations.

The bill does not appear to have a fiscal impact on state or local governments.

The bill has an effective date of July 1, 2016.

FULL ANALYSIS

I. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. EFFECT OF PROPOSED CHANGES:

Background

Condominium¹ and cooperative² associations are governed internally by an association whose members are the owners of units within the association. Many single-family residential communities are similarly governed by a homeowners' association³ made up of parcel owners. An association is in effect a partnership between unit or parcel owners who share an undivided interest in the common elements of the community.

Sections 718.111(4), 719.104(5), and 720.308, F.S., provide for the collection of periodic and special assessments to fund the association. To operate, an association must collect periodic assessments from the unit or parcel owners in order to pay for common expenses, management, maintenance, insurance, and reserves for anticipated future major expenses. Additionally, special assessments may be levied for expenditures that were not included in the association's annual budget.⁴ A unit or parcel owner is liable for all assessments that come due while he or she is the owner, and is jointly liable with past owners for previous unpaid assessments.⁵ Unpaid assessments may also become a lien on the parcel.⁶

An estoppel certificate issued by an association certifies the total debt owed to the association for unpaid financial obligations by a parcel owner or unit owner as of a specified date.⁷ The association is legally bound⁸ by the amount stated in the estoppel certificate. It may not later assert a contradictory claim of moneys due against any third party who relies on the certificate.⁹

Buyers, lenders, title insurance companies, and other entities involved in the sale or refinance of real property are examples of third-parties who rely on estoppel certificates to ascertain the value of property and ensure that title to property is transferred without any lien or encumbrance.

Present Situation – Form, Effective Period, and Delivery of Estoppel Certificate

An association is required to provide an estoppel certificate within 15 days after receiving a request¹⁰ from a unit or parcel owner, unit or parcel mortgagee, or the designee of the owner or mortgagee.¹¹

¹ A condominium association means, in addition to any entity responsible for the operation of common elements owned in undivided shares by unit owners, any entity which operates or maintains other real property in which unit owners have use rights, where membership in the entity is composed exclusively of unit owners or their elected or appointed representatives and is a required condition of unit ownership. s. 718.103(2), F.S.

² A cooperative association means the corporation for profit or not for profit that owns the record interest in the cooperative property or a leasehold of the property of a cooperative and that is responsible for the operation of the cooperative. s. 719.103(2), F.S.

³ A homeowners' association is a Florida corporation responsible for the operation of a community or a mobile home subdivision in which the voting membership is made up of parcel owners or their agents, or a combination thereof, and in which membership is a mandatory condition of parcel ownership, and which is authorized to impose assessments that, if unpaid, may become a lien on the parcel. s. 720.301(9), F.S.

⁴ ss. 718.103(24), 719.103(23), and 720.308(1)(a), F.S.

⁵ ss. 718.116(1), 719.108(1), and 720.3085(2)(b), F.S.

⁶ ss. 718.116(5), 719.108(4), and 720.3085, F.S.

⁷ ss. 718.116(8), 719.108(6), and 720.30851, F.S.

⁸ "Estoppel" means a bar that prevents one from asserting a claim or right that contradicts what one has said or done before or what has been legally established as true. *Black's Law Dictionary* (10th ed. 2014), available at Westlaw BLACKS.

⁹ ss. 718.116(8)(a), 719.108(6), and 720.30851(1), F.S.

¹⁰ A request to a condominium association must be in writing. Section 718.116(8), F.S.

¹¹ Sections 718.116(8), 719.108(6), and 720.30851, F.S. The cooperative act does not currently require that a cooperative association provide an estoppel certificate to the designee of the owner or mortgagee.

Current law provides few criteria for the form of the certificate. An estoppel certificate issued by a homeowners' or condominium association must only set forth all assessments and other moneys owed to the association with respect to the unit or parcel, disclose any fee charged by the association for the preparation of such certificate, and be signed by an officer or authorized agent of the association.¹² An estoppel certificate issued by a cooperative association must only set forth the amount of assessments or other moneys owed.¹³

Some associations provide the amount of assessments and other moneys owed to the association in one lump sum while others provide an itemized breakdown of assessments, late fees, interest, etc. The amount in some certificates reflect only the amount presently owed while others provide the amount owed through a given date a few weeks or months into the future which provides for a longer use of the certificate. Accordingly, the information provided in an estoppel certificate and the period of effectiveness varies among associations.

Effect of Proposed Changes – Form, Effective Period, and Delivery of Estoppel Certificate

The bill amends ss. 718.116(8), 719.108(6), and 720.30851, F.S., to provide uniform requirements for the form, effective period, and delivery of an estoppel certificate.

The bill provides that an estoppel certificate must specify all of the following information:

- The date of issuance.
- The amount of all assessments and other moneys owed to the association, limited to the amounts authorized to be recorded in the official records of the association.
- The amount of any additional assessments and other moneys that are scheduled to become due during the effective period of the estoppel certificate. If delivered on the date of issuance, the certificate has a 30 day effective period. The estoppel certificate is effective for 35 days if mailed to the requester. In calculating such amounts, the association may assume that any delinquent amounts will remain delinquent.
- The amount of the estoppel certificate fee.
- The signature of an officer or agent of the association.

Additionally, the bill reduces the period of time in which an association must issue an estoppel certificate from 15 days to 10 business days. The certificate must be delivered on the day of issuance by mail, hand, or electronic means.

Present Situation - Fees for Preparation of Estoppel Certificate

A homeowners' or condominium association may charge a fee for the preparation of an estoppel certificate as long as the fee is established by a written resolution adopted by the board, or provided by a written management, bookkeeping, or maintenance contract.¹⁴ A cooperative association may also charge a fee to prepare an estoppel certificate.¹⁵

Current law provides only that such preparation fee be "reasonable."¹⁶ Neither the Legislature nor the courts have provided guidance on what constitutes a reasonable fee for an estoppel certificate. This has caused variations in the amount of the fee charged by associations for the preparation of an estoppel certificate.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ s. 719.108(6), F.S.

¹⁴ ss. 718.116(8)(d) and 720.30851(3), F.S.

¹⁵ s. 719.108(6), F.S.

¹⁶ ss. 718.116(8)(c) and 719.108(6), F.S. There is no corresponding requirement in ch. 720, F.S., that the fee charged by a homeowners' association be reasonable.

After a series of public meetings in 2014, the Community Association Living Study Council,¹⁷ by unanimous vote, recommended to the Legislature that a reasonable cap be established for estoppel certificate fees and that such fees be tiered.¹⁸ The Council proposed several additional factors that should be considered when determining the amount of the fee including whether or not the owner is current in fees, delinquent in fees, or if the estoppel certificate was requested in conjunction with a bulk purchase.¹⁹

Effect of Proposed Changes - Fees for Preparation of Estoppel Certificate

The bill amends ss. 718.116(8), 719.108(6), and 720.30851, F.S., to establish the maximum fees that may be charged by an association for the preparation and delivery of an estoppel certificate as illustrated by **Figure 1**. The preparation and delivery of an estoppel certificate may not be conditioned upon the payment of any other fees not authorized by the bill. If the association issues the estoppel certificate more than 10 business days after receipt of the request, the association may not collect any fee.

Figure 1: Maximum Allowable Estoppel Certificate Fees

Authorized Fees	Cap*
<u>Base Fee</u>	
Preparation and Delivery of Estoppel Certificate:	
- Non-Delinquent Account or	Reasonable cost, not to exceed \$200
- Delinquent Account	Reasonable cost, not to exceed \$400
<u>Additional Fee (as applicable)</u>	+
Expedited Delivery within 3 days	\$100
TOTAL	Base Fees + Additional Fee (if applicable)

*Fee caps will be adjusted for inflation every three years based on the change in the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, U.S. City Average, all items.²⁰ The Department of Business and Professional Regulation must calculate and publish the adjusted rates on its website. The first adjustment should take effect July 1, 2019.

Present Situation – Payment and Allocation of Estoppel Certificate Fee

Any fee charged by a homeowners' or condominium association for an estoppel certificate is payable upon preparation of the certificate.²¹ If the certificate was requested in conjunction with the sale or mortgage of a unit or parcel but the sale does not occur, a homeowners' or condominium association must refund the fee, but only to a non-owner payor.²² The refund becomes the obligation of the unit or parcel owner and the homeowners' or condominium association may collect it from the owner in the same manner as an assessment.²³

¹⁷ The Community Association Living Study Council was created by the Legislature in 2008 to receive input from the public regarding issues of concern with respect to community association living and to advise the Legislature concerning revisions and improvements to the laws relating to community associations. The council consisted of seven members appointed by the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House Representatives, and the Governor. An ex officio nonvoting member was appointed by the Director of the Division of Florida Condominiums, Timeshares, and Mobile Homes. The Council was abolished by the Legislature in 2014. See s. 718.50151, F.S. (2013); Ch. 2014-133, L.O.F.

¹⁸ Community Association Living Study Council, *Final Report*, March 31, 2014, available at <http://www.myfloridalicense.com/Dbpr/lsc/documents/2014CALSCReport.pdf> (last visited Oct. 27, 2015).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ A measure produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States Department of Labor of the average change over time in the prices paid by urban consumers for a market basket of consumer goods and services.

²¹ ss. 718.116(8)(d) and 720.30851(3), F.S.; The time for payment of the fee to a cooperative association is not provided under current law.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

As estoppel certificates are generally required to close the sale or refinancing of a home and must be requested earlier than the time of closing, the fee is typically paid by one party to the transaction, usually the seller, rather than from the closing or settlement proceeds. Accordingly, the estoppel certificate fee, which is similar to other fees paid from closing or settlement proceeds, is most often imposed solely on owners due to the early payment requirement or the obligation to refund the fee if a sale does not occur.

Effect of Proposed Changes – Payment and Allocation of Estoppel Certificate Fee

The bill repeals the requirement that the fee for an estoppel certificate be paid upon preparation. If the estoppel certificate is requested in conjunction with the sale or refinancing of a unit or parcel, the fee and any supplemental fees must be paid from the closing or settlement proceeds. If the closing does not occur, the fee is the obligation of the unit or parcel owner and may be collected by an association in the same manner as an assessment which is the procedure under current law.

Provisions of current law authorizing a refund of fees by a homeowners' or condominium association to a non-owner payor are rendered obsolete by revising the time for payment of the fee and are therefore repealed by the bill.

Other Changes

- The bill amends current law to estop an association from collecting any moneys owed in excess of the amount stated in the certificate from any person, which would include owners, who in good faith relied upon the certificate as well as such person's successors and assigns. Current law provides that an association is only estopped from asserting a contradictory claim for amounts due against third parties who rely on an estoppel certificate, and expressly excludes owners from such protection.²⁴
- The bill amends ch. 719, F.S., governing cooperative associations, to provide that a cooperative association issue estoppel certificates consistent with standards, procedures and requirements governing condominium and homeowners' associations. This includes establishing the authority to charge estoppel fees by resolution or contract and authorizing a cooperative unit owner to bring an action against the association pursuant to the summary procedure under s. 51.011, F.S., to compel compliance with the estoppel certificate requirements.²⁵
- The bill implements an additional recommendation by the Community Association Living Study Council to authorize the use of digital communications by associations.²⁶ Specifically, the bill provides for the electronic delivery of estoppel certificates and authorizes the electronic submission of estoppel certificate requests.

B. SECTION DIRECTORY:

Section 1 amends s. 718.116, F.S., relating to assessments; liability; lien and priority; interest; collection.

Section 2 amends s. 719.108, F.S., relating to rents and assessments; liability; lien and priority; interest; collection; cooperative ownership.

²⁴ ss. 718.116(8)(a), 719.108(6), and 720.30851(1), F.S.

²⁵ ss. 718.116(8)(b) and 720.30851(2), F.S.; s. 51.011, F.S., specifies a summary procedure for actions that specifically provide for this procedure by statute or rule. Under the summary procedure, all defenses of law or fact are required to be contained in the defendant's answer which must be filed within five days after service of process of the plaintiff's complaint. If the answer incorporates a counterclaim, the plaintiff must include all defenses of law or fact in his or her answer to the counterclaim and serve it within five days after service of the counterclaim. (Fla. R. Civ. Pro. 1.140, requires an answer, including any counterclaims, within 20 days after service of the complaint.) No other pleadings are permitted, and all defensive motions, including motions to quash, are heard by the court prior to trial. Postponements are not permitted for discovery, and the procedure also provides for an immediate trial, if requested.

²⁶ *Supra* at note 17.

Section 3 amends s. 720.30851, F.S., relating to estoppel certificates.

Section 4 provides an effective date of July 1, 2016.

II. FISCAL ANALYSIS & ECONOMIC IMPACT STATEMENT

A. FISCAL IMPACT ON STATE GOVERNMENT:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on state revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on state expenditures.

B. FISCAL IMPACT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

1. Revenues:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on local government revenues.

2. Expenditures:

The bill does not appear to have any impact on local government expenditures.

C. DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT ON PRIVATE SECTOR:

To the extent that an association currently imposes a greater fee for an estoppel certificate than the fees authorized by the bill, the bill may have a positive economic impact on unit and parcel owners of such association by reducing the fee required to obtain an estoppel certificate. In such instance there would be a corresponding negative reduction in the fee collected by the association.

D. FISCAL COMMENTS:

None.

III. COMMENTS

A. CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES:

1. Applicability of Municipality/County Mandates Provision:

The bill does not appear to require counties or municipalities to take an action requiring the expenditure of funds, reduce the authority that counties or municipalities have to raise revenue in the aggregate, nor reduce the percentage of state tax shared with counties or municipalities.

2. Other:

Estoppel certificates are often prepared on behalf of an association by association counsel or community association management companies pursuant to a contract for services. The fee caps established by the bill may be greater or less than the current rates negotiated between the association and such contractors for the preparation of estoppel certificates.

Article I, s. 10 of the United States Constitution, and art. I, s. 10 of the state constitution prohibit the legislature from enacting any law impairing the obligation of contracts. Although written in terms of an absolute prohibition, courts have long interpreted the provisions to only prohibit enactment of any law that is an *unreasonable* impairment of existing contractual rights.

In *Allied Structural Steel Co. v. Spannaus*,²⁷ the United States Supreme Court set forth the following principles in examining a law under an impairment analysis, ruling:

[T]he first inquiry must be whether the state law has, in fact, operated as a substantial impairment of a contractual relationship. The severity of the impairment measures the height of the hurdle the state legislation must clear. Minimal alteration of contractual obligations may end the inquiry at its first stage. Severe impairment, on the other hand, will push the inquiry to a careful examination of the nature and purpose of the state legislation.

Referring to the *Allied* opinion, the Florida Supreme Court in *Pomponio v. Claridge of Pompano Condominium, Inc.*²⁸ stated that courts must consider:

- (a) Was the law enacted to deal with a broad, generalized economic or social problem?
- (b) Does the law operate in an area which was already subject to state regulation at the time the parties' contractual obligations were originally undertaken, or does it invade an area never before subject to regulation by the state?
- (c) Does the law effect a temporary alteration of the contractual relationships of those within its coverage, or does it work a severe, permanent, and immediate change in those relationships irrevocably and retroactively?

B. RULE-MAKING AUTHORITY:

The bill does not appear to create a need for rulemaking or rulemaking authority.

²⁷ *Allied Structural Steel Co. v. Spannaus*, 438 U.S. 234, 245 (1978).

²⁸ *Pomponio v. Claridge of Pompano Condominium, Inc.*, 378 So.2d 774, 779 (Fla. 1979).

C. DRAFTING ISSUES OR OTHER COMMENTS:

It is unclear whether the bill authorizes an association to provide information regarding multiple units or parcels within a single estoppel certificate. If information regarding multiple units or parcels may be provided within a single estoppel certificate, language regarding the computation of fees may require clarification.

IV. AMENDMENTS/ COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE CHANGES

On November 3, 2015, the Civil Justice Subcommittee adopted one amendment and reported the bill favorably as a committee substitute. The amendment requires the Department of Business and Professional Regulation to calculate the adjusted fee caps every three years and post the amounts on its website. This analysis is drafted to the committee substitute as passed by the Civil Justice Subcommittee.