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Clerks of courts face new round of budget cuts

By [MIKE SALINERO](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Clerks of courts around the state could face a new round of state budget cuts they say will devastate their ability to manage court paperwork, process speeding tickets and oversee public documents.

An amendment filed Thursday by state Sen. JD Alexander, R-Lake Wales, would cut funding to the 67 clerks of court by \$23.3 million. The Senate's Policy and Steering Committee on Ways and Means finished adopting the 2010-11 budget with Alexander's amendment Friday afternoon.

Ken Burke, Pinellas circuit court clerk, said he and Hillsborough clerk Pat Frank saw Alexander earlier this week. Alexander told the clerks he was going to offer an amendment to the Senate appropriations bill that would "take things in a new direction."

Burke said Alexander's changes were not in a package of amendments they received from the Appropriations Committee staff, and the amendment was not posted on the Senate Web site until an hour before the Ways and Means committee met.

Alexander could not be reached for comment.

Documents released by the Appropriations Office show Alexander's amendment would cut the Hillsborough clerk's office by 1 percent, or \$290,453. Pasco County's cut would be 6 percent, or \$807,974, under the amendment, while the Pinellas clerk's funding would be sliced by 10 percent, or \$2.3 million. Burke said the clerks were not privy to the formula that was used to calculate the cuts.

Last year, state budget cuts forced the Frank, the Hillsborough clerk, to lay off 58 people, or 12 percent of the workforce, and freeze or eliminate other positions. As a result of the cutbacks, Frank had to close the satellite office at Floriland Business Center on North Florida Avenue.

Frank was not available for comment.

If Alexander's amendment survives the remaining month of the legislative session, Burke said he will have to lay off 58 employees on top of the 60 he had to let go last year. That means the Pinellas office will have lost more than 25 percent of the 426 employees who worked there before last year's funding cuts.

"We won't be able to meet our constitutional obligations," Burke said. "Case files won't be processed properly or in a timely manner and pleadings won't get filed. Dockets won't get updated so lawyers can see what has transpired. There are serious concerns here."

State Sen. Victor Crist, R-Tampa, said the amendment was troubling.

"It will mean significant reductions in staffing and could mean restricting access to the courts," said Crist, who is chairman of the Senate Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations Committee.