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MIAMI HERALD WATCHDOG

## Farm tax reform is sought

### Lawmakers aim to grow revenue by reforming a tax law for farmers that is widely abused by developers.

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Two South Florida legislators want to fix a widely abused state law that grants huge property tax breaks on farmland.

The proposals by Rep. Juan Zapata, a Miami Republican, and Sen. Steve Geller, a Hallandale Beach Democrat, would end the tax relief once a landowner takes steps toward transforming crops and pastures into homes, stores or offices. Those steps include rezoning and seeking development permits.

Their efforts come after a Miami Herald investigation found widespread exploitation of the state's 1959 "greenbelt" law by developers seeking to reduce the cost of holding vacant land.

Corporate property owners in both counties have collected six-figure tax breaks even after winning approvals to build warehouses and subdivisions. In some cases, the discounts continued after construction was under way.

"People are actually building, chasing away cows with bulldozers, and still have the agricultural exemption," Geller said. "That is wrong. When you reduce one person's property taxes, you are raising somebody else's."

Reforms are sure to face stiff resistance from the powerful farm bureau and development lobbies. Genuine farmers -- particularly Miami-Dade's plant and vegetable growers -- worry that change will remove corporate landowners' incentive to lease them cheap dirt.

"There's always abuses with any tax law," said tropical fruit grower James Humble, president and owner of Pita Groves. "I just hate to see a change in a law that's been so good."

Legislators and county officials say they plan to craft language that weeds out abusers but leaves working farmers alone.

"I come in peace," Zapata recently told growers on the Miami-Dade Agricultural Practices Committee.

"I don't want you to think that the greenbelt law is being threatened," he said. "But at the end of the day, there is a problem. We can't bury our heads in the sand."

Decades ago, the law was designed to protect farmers from being forced out of business by soaring property taxes. But corporate landowners have discovered that by running a few cows on scruffy lots, they can reduce their property taxes by 99 percent, as they await permits and draft construction plans.

Most other states impose firmer restrictions on the tax relief, setting minimum income and acreage requirements on protected farms or collecting back taxes once farmland is developed.

But in Florida, a landowner who has cows or crops on the property on Jan. 1 can clear the land weeks later and still qualify for a full year of tax relief.

Zapata and Geller are working with representatives of the agricultural industry in hopes of winning support for bills now in draft form.

Meanwhile, Miami-Dade property appraiser Frank Jacobs is continuing a crackdown on suspect farms begun months ago. He has withdrawn tax breaks from several suspect farms and is asking all owners for financial documents that demonstrate "good faith" commercial farming.

"Are they actually engaged in a business? We at least want to know that," Jacobs said. "And obviously, there should be an intent to earn a profit."