

Pinellas beach mayors want to take back power over short-term rentals

By [Tracey McManus](#)



Jo Hammond, 57, left, and Flash Gordon Williamson, 59, stand at the property line bordering their home at 514 Janice Place, left, and a rental property at 610 Barry Place, on Indian Rocks Beach. Hammond and Williamson say they have been terrorized by noise from the Barry Place property which they say has become a "party house," that is rented as a short term vacation rental. (DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times)

CLEARWATER — Nearly every week so far this year, Flash Gordon Williamson and Jo Hammond have seen a different group of vacationers arrive in the house next door in their quiet Gulf front neighborhood.

College kids who brought new friends back from the bar to party after closing time. A family whose kids began splashing in the pool by 7 a.m. A full-fledged wedding reception.

The couple thought they settled in their dream home in 2003 when they moved into a one-story bungalow on a residential finger of Indian Rocks Beach. Since the boom of beachfront property owners renting out homes by the week, even by days, through platforms like Airbnb and others, it's become more of a nightmare.

"It's no way to live, it's not what we bargained for when we moved here," said Williamson, 59. "What should be this idyllic neighborhood, all of a sudden we're next door to a hotel resort motel."

A state law prevents cities from regulating the length of time people can rent out vacation homes in residential neighborhoods. But a group of Pinellas County beach mayors are brewing a grassroots movement to bring the Legislative Delegation to a roundtable discussion this summer and demand a bill be filed next year giving oversight back to cities.

In a conservative Legislature that points to property rights and tourism, state Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, said change won't be easy.

"There's concern that cities will far overreach and begin to violate property rights of these people that bought these homes as second homes and have rights to rent their houses out," Brandes said. "It can be very political at the local level."

About 82 percent of the 154,000 short-term residential units in Florida being advertised online right now are concentrated in just 15 counties, including Pinellas, [according to Host Compliance, a San Francisco tech company that provides rental data to more than 125 governments nationwide.](#)

As of last month, Host Compliance data showed 8,147 rental units advertised in Pinellas, a 57 percent increase from last year. Hillsborough County is not as flooded, with 2,502 units advertised. But it represents a 64 percent jump from 2017.

A 2011 state law, amended in 2014, prevents cities from banning short-term rentals and from regulating duration and frequency of stays, although ordinances on the books before June 2011 are grandfathered in.

But the law made it so cities that alter existing ordinances in any way lose them entirely. That's what happened to Indian Rocks Beach in 2012 when officials tried to change wording in a broader review of land use amendments.

Since then, Mayor Cookie Kennedy has fielded steady complaints from residents. She drove out to Williamson and Hammond's home to see the wedding reception next door. Her City Commission is expected to vote on an ordinance in August that's a work-around for cracking down on short-term rentals, requiring them to register with the city, have a 24-hour emergency contact posted outside, issue rental agreements with all occupants' information and post noise and trash rules in the home.

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North Redington Beach Mayor Bill Queen, whose city has a 90-day rental minimum in residential zones, said he fears if the Legislature doesn't act now, the tourism industry will pressure lawmakers to further restrict cities and revoke grandfathered ordinances like his.

"This is a show stopper, it's going to hurt us," Queen said. "Do you know what short term rentals bring? It's issues with noise, parking, garbage, safety. Instead of us dealing with it every now and then, we're going to be dealing with it every week."

Indian Shores Mayor Patrick Soranno said the concept goes further than vacation rentals. He sees the Legislature infringing on home rule, a city's ability to craft its own laws.

"They're telling us how to run our towns," Soranno said. "We have zoning laws enacted by local towns based on residents' wishes. If you're zoned residential, you can't put a tanning facility next to you, a pig farm, commercial interests. What they're doing is commercializing a residential area. Where do you draw the line at an Airbnb? It's a business."

State Sen. David Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, said he intends to file a bill in the 2019 legislative session that would give oversight of vacation rentals to the state Division of Hotels and Restaurants but also allow local governments to set limits on duration and frequency "within reason."

Simmons said he could not commit yet on a time limit, like a seven-, 14- or 30-day minimum, but wants to provoke conversation to find a compromise.

"To completely deny somebody in an area the ability to use his or her property as a rental, that's not something contemplated here," he said. "It's preserving the quality of a neighborhood in a community based upon the rights of local government to do that. We've got to stop the abuses but at the same time continue to permit a robust and highly competitive market in vacation rentals."

Simmons introduced a similar bill in 2018, but it was consolidated with a more restrictive bill from state Sen. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, that would have further pre-empted local regulation. It died in committee.

Brandes said if a bill is introduced next year, he would advocate for up to a 14-day rental minimum, giving cities with no laws on the books some relief and providing a middle ground he thinks would be palatable to rental proponents. Brandes said he would advocate for cities with grandfathered ordinances for longer restrictions to keep them as-is.

Even that doesn't appear it would fly.

"I asked (Brandes) to rescind the 2011 legislation," Queen said, giving cities full authority to regulate. "We did not send him up there to try to pass through what he thinks can pass through. We sent him up there to represent the people."

Greg Holcomb, government relations manager for the Vacation Rental Management Association, said cities can address bad actors through existing noise and trash ordinances. Any further regulation inhibits tourism and property rights.

"Ultimately a community has to decide, do we want the tourism, the revenue, the taxes that come through with all that or do we want to close our borders and build a wall around our communities and say stay out?" Holcomb said.

To Williamson and Hammond, it feels like they're being forced out.

A woodworker, Williamson built the Curly Maple and Bubinga wood door of their home, installed the cherry baseboards, peppered the walls with Hammond's artwork.

"Every inch of this place we crafted to our personalities," he said.

But he said the influx of vacation rentals has pushed him to begin considering leaving his dream home, and the next-door neighbors, behind.

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