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A Times Editorial

Online carpetbaggers fleece Florida

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Reconstruction may be over, but the Florida Legislature is still willing to help the carpetbagger. The House Finance and Tax Committee has shamelessly revived a bill that would permanently advantage out-of-state online travel companies such as Expedia, Orbitz and Travelocity over in-state hotels that book rooms and hire Floridians.

HB 493 is aimed at endorsing a highly disputed practice that is the target of lawsuits by local governments.

Online travel companies collect tourist taxes on only the wholesale price they pay for rooms, not the full price the customer pays. Yet if a hotel customer books directly through a hotel, he or she pays taxes on the retail price.

This is far from a new issue. For years, fair-minded lawmakers of both political parties and members of the Pinellas County Commission have sought to clarify the law so that online travel companies would have to collect tourist taxes on the retail price. At each turn they've been outmaneuvered by the out-of-state behemoths, including at Tuesday's committee meeting.

The House bill's sponsor, Rep. Jason Brodeur, R-Sanford, hails from Sanford but takes his cues from a company based in Bellevue, Wash. When a colleague asked a question, Brodeur responded: "I will defer to Jennifer to further explain." That's Jennifer Green, Expedia lobbyist.