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Sarasota schools get \$2M+ back from tax collector Manatee hints at similar tactic to claw back funds

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Sarasota County Schools clawed back more than \$2 million that the county tax collector withheld as fees for collecting a voter-approved school tax.

But other school districts, including Sarasota's neighbor to the north, have taken a different approach — with different results. Some elected leaders in Manatee may now be regretting that tactic.

Manatee County Schools has been facing the same battle for funding since 2024, when its tax collector similarly began charging the district to collect a voter-approved property tax that provides funding for athletics, teacher retention and school operations.

Like Sarasota Tax Collector Mike Moran, the Manatee tax collector has withheld nearly \$3 million from the Manatee school district over the past two years, a fee that had in the past been charged to the county commission.

The dispute stems from a disagreement over who should pay tax collectors for processing a voter-approved school property taxes. For years, county commissions generally covered those fees. Beginning in 2024, however, some tax collectors argued that school districts should pay instead — a change that diverted millions of dollars away from public education.

While both Sarasota and Manatee schools have faced the same challenge, they've taken different approaches to resolving it. Sarasota has been loud and aggressive — filing a lawsuit, publicly criticizing elected officials and pushing lawmakers for a legislative fix, which was signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis on Monday.

Manatee County has worked largely behind the scenes and has yet to recover most of the money withheld by its tax collector.

"I'm still angry about the situation," Manatee County School Board Member Heather Felton told Suncoast Searchlight.. "And I still feel we should take action."

Sarasota County Schools sued its tax collector in the 12th Judicial Circuit Court in April and has waged an unrelenting battle in both the courts and the press. In Manatee County, public comments from school and elected officials about the ongoing dispute have been muted and infrequent.

Manatee school officials have only had closed-door meetings with tax collector officials to resolve the dispute, but Manatee Schools Superintendent Laurie Breslin sent a letter on Monday to Manatee Tax Collector Ken Burton Jr. requesting he "cease withholding future millage revenue receipts and return all funds it (tax collector's office) withheld." The letter gives Burton until July 17 to respond.

"We have every intention of pursuing funds that have been collected from the district," Breslin told Suncoast Searchlight. "This money that has been taken by the tax collector really has lessened our ability to impact the classroom."

Mandie Ferguson, director of communications for the Manatee County Tax Collector's Office, said the agency will return to charging the county commission instead of the school district on July 1 now that a legislative fix proposed by State Rep. James Buchanan, R-Osprey, has been signed into law.

"We have had direct and productive conversations with the school district," she said. "Our goal is to work collaboratively."

Buchanan's fix requires tax collectors to either waive the commission tied to school voter-approved property taxes or make the county commission pick up the bill, as both Manatee and Sarasota had previously done for years.

But the proposal does not require funds already withheld from public schools to be returned. So far, nearly \$500,000 has been returned in Manatee County — just a fraction of the total funds withheld.

Ferguson said there's been no discussion with the county commissioners about it paying the withheld fees, and there's no current plan to return the rest of the funds. However, Ferguson called the legislative fix proposed by Buchanan a "win-win for everybody" with the tax collector now having clear direction under state law.

**Different situations,
different outcomes**

Breslin sees Sarasota's dispute as fundamentally different, pointing to a key decision last summer by the Sarasota County Commission that thrust the issue into public view and gave residents an opportunity to pressure elected leaders.

Unlike Sarasota, the Manatee County Commission never voted to send the school district the tax bill on its own — and with little notice to school officials, according to the district.

The distinction matters, Breslin said.

"(A) different approach doesn't mean we don't arrive at the same answer," Breslin said. "We still have work to do and maybe for Sarasota it's resolved, but that doesn't mean that we're done."

Breslin inherited the dispute after nearly two turbulent years for Manatee County schools. The district fired one superintendent, functioning for months under an interim leader before the school board landed on a permanent replacement.

County Commissioner Tal Siddique does not remember voting to send the bill to the school district. But he also believes the legislation fix provides clarity going forward. Both sides should begin to rebuild relationships, he said.

"We have enough fights in Manatee County," Siddique told Suncoast Searchlight. "Just let it slide, and it will be fixed next year."

Siddique also expressed concern about the tax collector's costs to process the school tax. Next year, county commissioners will have to pay that fee. "It's not like he's sending homing pigeons and humans to collect it," Siddique said. "I don't understand the costs."

While Manatee County Schools has worked behind the scenes to resolve the dispute, Sarasota County Schools has fought the battle in public, filing litigation in April over "unlawful diversion" of taxpayer funds.

Sarasota Superintendent Terry Connor wrote an editorial in May in the Sarasota Herald-Tribune advocating for the return of the withheld tax dollars shortly after the lawsuit.

Daniel DeLeo, a lawyer representing the school district in the suit, has also been a zealous advocate for the school district's position. He blasted Moran and other tax officials after county commissioners voted to pay the fees, yet didn't immediately return the money to the schools.

DeLeo celebrated DeSantis signing the bill that included Buchanan's legislative fix on June 29.

"This is a huge win not only for Sarasota County Schools, but for all school districts across the state," he wrote in a text message to Suncoast Searchlight. "I'm proud of what we accomplished today. Sometimes you just have to stand and fight bullies."

Manatee school board members praise Sarasota's approach

Manatee school board members praised Sarasota's approach and the results it has achieved, while hinting that a similar tactic could soon be implemented there.

Burton, the Manatee tax collector, still has about \$2.5 million withheld that district leaders said could be used to enhance public education.

At least two school board members and the superintendent said they could attempt a similar public pressure campaign against the tax collector after July 1.

"They didn't wait, and they were proactive," Felton said of Sarasota's approach.

Felton said that previous superintendents were told that the tax collector was seeking an opinion from the Florida Attorney General that would have provided an interpretation of state law. School officials agreed to wait on that opinion before taking any additional action.

According to both tax and school officials, that conversation began in late 2025 before Breslin took over as superintendent.

It turns out, they had been waiting for months for an opinion that was never sent.

Ferguson, the spokesperson for the Manatee tax collector, told Suncoast Searchlight that seeking an attorney general's opinion isn't as easy as mailing a letter.

"There was a lot of research that had to be done prior to submitting," she said.

Ferguson said that after Sarasota sued, the tax collector's office decided not to send the request.

Felton said it frustrates her that the tax collector had not done so, noting the district had been "waiting for nothing."

School Board Member Charlie Kennedy also said it does appear that Sarasota's tactics worked better than Manatee's approach, noting that he's "been ready since day one" to take a more aggressive stance. "But we are sitting here waiting," he said. "We've tried that and it doesn't seem to be working."

This story was produced by Suncoast Searchlight, a nonprofit newsroom of the Community News Collaborative serving Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto counties. Learn more at suncoastsearchlight.org .

---- **Index References** ----

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