

Florida's healthy marriage guide could actually help sick institution

A lawmaker has introduced a bill that would allow the state to tell people what color lipstick to use, where to go for Valentine's Day dinner and what to do or not do in the bedroom.

If you think I'm kidding, you must have missed the reaction when the measure was filed last week. As one headline put it: "Bill Would Task 6 Republican Appointees With Creating 'Florida Guide To Healthy Marriages.'"

Knowing Republicans, that means sex will be prohibited until at least three years after the honeymoon.

I'm exaggerating, but I understand why people think it's a crazy idea. The law proposed by state Sen. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, would require people to read a "Healthy Marriage" guide before being granted a marriage license.

Nobody wants to be told how to run their marriage. Especially if the people telling them are lawmakers who starch their underwear and might have had an illicit romance or two.

But if it's done right — and that's the proverbial *IF* — the bill might help at least a few people deal with a festering societal problem.

We can all agree that a happy marriage beats a broken one, right?

If nothing else, it makes for a healthier bank account. Studies show married men make about \$16,000 more annually than single men. Married couples make about \$45,000 more a year than households headed by a single female.

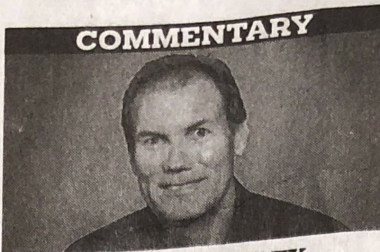
Being part of married family reduces a child's probability of living in poverty by 82%. Boys born to single mothers have higher truancy problems and are more likely to drop out of school and commit serious crimes.

You may not buy Baxley's argument that divorce and out-of-wedlock childbirth costs Florida taxpayers \$1.9 billion annually. Marriage is not for everybody, and there are plenty of successful single-parent families.

But if you want to live a stable and prosperous and long life, the odds indisputably improve if you have a wedding ring on your finger. So why not promote that?

"I don't think legislators are in any way proficient in determining a good or bad marriage," Orlando Sen. Linda Stewart said. "That needs to be handled in churches, not in the legislative body."

Legislators wouldn't actually do it. The



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governor, speaker of the House and Senate president would each appoint two "marriage education and family advocates" to write the guide. It will address conflict management, family expectations, communication skills, financial management, domestic violence and

parenting responsibilities.

This is where the *IF* comes in.

There's no shortage of sound advice that has helped many a marriage. If the bill has any chance of passing, Baxley has to convince skeptics the guide will be long on practical counseling and short on moralizing.

The state already requires couples to read the Florida Family Law Handbook in order to get a marriage license. After congratulating readers on their impending nuptials, it deals mainly with the legal implications of marriage and divorce.

It took me about 10 minutes to plow through it. That's probably nine minutes longer than a lot of people spend, since all they have to do is say they've read it.

Unlike a driver's license, there is no test to confirm your knowledge. It would be the same with the Healthy Marriage guide. There'd be no test. If someone didn't like the advice about spending free time with their spouse, they'd be free to laugh it off and play golf that weekend.

If you're worried it might be just a waste of taxpayer money, don't. The guide would be paid for through donations, so it might be just a waste of private money.

Then again, it might not.

Florida has long had and somewhat rocky relationship with marriage. St. Augustine was the site of the first documented Christian marriage in the continental U.S., according to LaFlorida.org.

In 1565, Miguel Rodriguez took Luisa de Abrego to be his lawfully wedded wife. A decade later, Abrego confessed to having two husbands, and the marriage was dissolved.

Last year, about 77,000 marriages were dissolved in Florida.

There's no guarantee a guide would make much of a dent in that. We do know marriage is a proven way to reduce poverty, combat crime and improve health.

Spending 10 minutes reading how to do those things isn't really all that crazy an idea.

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