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Who gets to steer big ships into port?

Ever see the TV show *The Love Boat*?

Come on, sure you did. Big luxury cruise ship, passengers always getting romantically involved with each other, all done under the watchful eyes of Captain Stubing, Doc, Julie, Gopher, Issac and the gang.

But if the Love Boat ever came to Florida, Captain Stubing would have to stand aside. Cruise and cargo ships must be guided in and out of Florida ports by our local, state-regulated harbor pilots.

There are 94 of these pilots in Florida, and on the rare occasion they make news, it's usually because (1) somebody thinks they make too much money, (2) something bad happened, or (3) something bad *didn't* happen, as with a pilot who grounded his vessel a couple of years ago to prevent a much worse accident.

Most often, it's the money.

Pilots make \$100,000 to \$400,000 a year, out of fees set by a state board and paid by the cruise lines and shipping companies. The average fee is \$1,300, but it can cost a few thousand more than that to get a big one in and out.

Pretty good wages. On the other hand, how much is it worth not to knock down the Sunshine Skyway again, or not to crack open a tanker full of anhydrous ammonia while passing South Tampa?

Just askin'.

Ah, but the whole world is politics, even the Love Boat. And so one of the many issues our Florida Legislature will consider this spring is whether we ought to change Florida's system.

The ship owners are pushing it.

It's not like their own guys are slouches, they say. Some, especially cruise ships, are in and out of here all the time. Also, they got that GPS thing these days.

There's a new state study out that presents a range of possible changes.

One idea is simply to abolish state regulation altogether, and rely on the feds. But our state rules are tougher, and the feds' relatively minimal.

One idea is to kill the state system and let each of Florida's 11 ports do their own thing. But critics say this would create a Wild West patchwork of rules, and the temptation to lure shippers by having fewer rules.

And one idea is to give "exemptions" to foreign-flagged vessels that enter Florida ports frequently, such as cruise ships.

I'm told by folks involved that the Legislature is likely to settle the question the wrong way — with a sneaky amendment tacked onto a bill somewhere, or with fine print slipped into the state budget.

But this is not just another routine squabble among lobbyists, to be decided by influence and campaign contributions. It's about essential public safety and the security of the state.

If I were a legislator, before I voted on a change, I would ask myself: Am I confident that I will *never* have to stand up in public and defend it?

In fairness, the state study does find some things wrong with Florida's system. The membership of the two boards that regulate pilots and rates are fairly clubby and out of date. The way they set rates is haphazard, not based on a standard process.

So, by all means, take a look at it. But if you're askin' me to choose between saving an average of \$1,300 a pop for luxury liners and cargo ships, and having a harbor pilot whose life and work consists of knowing every shallow and depth, turn and current and hazard of Tampa Bay — I gotta tell you, my prejudice is toward the pilot.