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Resist Pressure To Create State Crime Commission

EDITORIAL

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ONCE AGAIN, Florida lawmakers must resist pressure to create a statewide crime commission. While superficially attractive, such a commission would duplicate work being done well by the statewide grand jury and the Governor's Council on Organized Crime and would have questionable, potentially dangerous powers.

Frank Pinter, chairman of the Broward County Crime Commission, urged lawmakers this week to create a committee to study the idea in time for the 1987 legislative session.

The history of organized crime commissions is long on political hype and short on courtroom convictions. While some criminals have been jailed, much more effort has been expended in generating publicity for ambitious prosecutors and conducting endless public hearings where "experts" recycle old news that -- surprise! -- there really is a Mafia.

In sharp contrast is the solid record of Florida's statewide grand jury. Eschewing a meaningless attack on a generic "organized crime problem," it has focused on specific, multi-county criminal conspiracies.

Avoiding the temptation of headline-grabbing fishing expeditions, the statewide grand jury has instead only subpoenaed witnesses or suspects involved in specific crimes. It has cooperated with local state attorneys, and not tried to usurp their authority over specifically local problems. And -- most important -- the grand jury probes resulted in numerous arrests and convictions and more than a million dollars in fines.

Meanwhile, the Governor's Council on Organized Crime has proven effective in evaluating the scope of the enemy, setting priorities for prosecution and coming up with recommendations for a more integrated approach.

The proposal for a statewide crime commission is also objectionable because of its suggested extreme powers -- to issue subpoenas, cite people for contempt, grant suspects immunity from prosecution testimony or arrest people without liability.

Such powers should not be granted to an appointed panel, and should be exercised only by a judge, grand jury or prosecutor. They can easily be abused, threatening civil liberties of witnesses or even interfering with ongoing investigations or trials.

Instead of creating such a crime commission, lawmakers should provide more funding for the existing statewide grand jury and the governor's council to increase their effectiveness.

Meanwhile, Florida voters can complement the work of the statewide grand jury and add an important soldier in the war against organized crime by approving a constitutional amendment in November to create the position of statewide prosecutor.