If discussion at a Friday morning committee meeting is any indication, then the stage is being set for a bruising three-way debate about the scope of practice for nurse practitioners.

Proponents of granting advance practice nurses more legal authority Friday cited academic studies, professional reports and personal stories during a 3 1/2-hour meeting of the House Select Committee on Health Care Workforce Innovation.

They want to lift restrictive nurse practitioner licensing laws to help ease a physician shortage in the state. The Florida Medical Association and doctors, however, back a five-point plan they say would increase access to health care but does not include granting advance practice nurses more signature authority nor lift mandatory supervision by a physician.

Perry Thurston, the House’s leading Democrat, has joined the debate. He asks: If APNs are available to relieve a physician shortage then why is neither chamber discussing Medicaid expansion?

Florida ranks 42nd in the number of resident-physicians per 1,000 residents, according to the Department of Health.

Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples is among the lawmakers leading the charge to change Florida’s scope-of-practice regulations.

“Forty-nine other states cannot be wrong. It’s just that simple. We are behind the curve on this,” Hudson said.

Hudson and other lawmakers, along with Florida TaxWatch and the Florida Association of Nurse Practitioners, want to loosen regulations on advanced nurse practitioners,
possibly allowing them to treat patients free of mandatory oversight of a physician. The committee will develop a proposal.

The FMA points out that physicians, however, are better prepared to diagnose and treat patients. They argue that because doctors spend more time in the classroom and in training under a licensed physician that they have more expertise.

“The eye doesn’t see what the mind doesn’t know,” Christie Alexander, M.D., an assistant professor at the FSU School of Medicine, told the committee.

Florida has the most restrictive scope-of-practice regulations in the nation. Nineteen states recognize advanced nurse practitioners as primary care providers. Thirty more states impose fewer regulations than Florida on what they are allowed to do, providing authority to prescribe more medicines, order tests and set up their own practice.

The debate appears to be shaping up to be one of regulations versus best medical practices and is being conducted in a committee with a focus on workforce innovation.

Catherine Dower of the Center for the Health Professions at the University of California San Francisco presented the committee an overview of the education of advanced practice nurses, scope of practice regulations in other states and a variety of studies that examined the issue.

“Are you aware of any study that would support or defend the regulatory scheme in Florida,” Rep. John Wood, R-Winter Haven, asked Dower.

“No, I would not,” Dower said.

“If we were to change our practice act, do you believe or are their studies to show how that would create a more migratory flow of potential workforce to our state and change the image of our state?” Hudson said.

“The jury is still out on the cause and effect,” Dower said. “We’re not sure whether the higher nurse practitioner population is helping to drive more full-practice autonomy in those states or the full-practice autonomy is bringing those practitioners into those states.”

Committee Chairman Jose Olivia, R-Hialeah, said the panel will produce a proposal this session to address the workforce needs of the health-care industry.

“Today gave us insight into the different areas and the different perspectives, and we will move with deliberate speed,” Olivia said at the meeting’s conclusion.

Thurston stood nearby thinking out loud about last session’s Medicaid expansion debates when the issue of a physician shortage was among the arguments employed to defeat efforts to expand Medicaid. And now, in committee he was handed a plethora of studies and testimony suggesting that APNs can be used to eliminate that shortage.
“And it is intriguing that we’re having no discussion in either chamber about the expansion of health care,” said Thurston, of Fort Lauderdale. “The Democrats are going to continue to make it our No. 1 focus.”