

Tallahassee Weekly Report, January 26-30

Below please find a summary of news and events that took place throughout the state this past week.

Governor Crist Signs Revised Budget

Governor Charlie Crist signed the revised budget passed during the recent Special Session, but not before restoring over \$360 million. Crist vetoed cuts to teacher merit pay, tourism protection and the Florida Forever land buying program. Legislative leaders had previously rejected the Governor's plan to avoid steep cuts by borrowing money from trust funds and approve the gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe.

Legislators must now focus their attention on the upcoming legislative session and the further cuts to the budget they will be facing. As it stands, next year's budget will likely have a deficit of over \$3 billion. The Governor will issue his budget proposals by February 20.

Below is a list of items restored by the Governor:

- \$28.9 million to help teachers, autism education and the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind.
- \$22.8 million for the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. Crist said it would help 31,000 people.
- \$16.2 million to fund more substance abuse programs and guardian ad litem services, and to avoid layoffs of 118 probation officers.
- \$22 million to fund tourism, Visit Florida marketing and other economic development grants.
- \$600,000 for Florida National Guard and continued tuition assistance, body armor and other assistance.

The Governor's cuts leave nearly \$200 million in savings in the event that tax collections continue to decline. The budget passed by the legislature had left nearly \$400 million.

Several legislators expressed interest in how the economic stimulus package currently making its way through Congress will bring the state's budget situation some sort of relief. They have stated is it too early to properly pinpoint money from the package, since it is still making its way through the legislative process in Washington.

Governor Crist has asked the federal government for \$7 billion from the stimulus package, with \$6 billion going to road projects, and the remainder going to health care and schools.

OIA's state, federal, and local teams will be working closely to track this package as it heads towards final passage, since money is expected to trickle down to the state, as well as cities.

Miami-Dade Legislative Delegation

The Miami-Dade Legislative Delegation held a public hearing in the Board of County Commissioners chambers on Thursday January 29, 2009. The delegation heard short presentations from over 50 organizations, ranging from colleges to community based organizations. The delegation was welcomed to the chambers by Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, the Chair of the State Intergovernmental Affairs Sub-Committee.

The first presentation was from the South Florida Water Management District, which updated the delegation on the progress of the U.S. Sugar deal. They were aided in their presentation by Secretary Michael Sole, of the Department of Environmental Protection. The delegation also heard from the University of Miami School of Medicine and the Florida International University School of Medicine, as a part of their effort to continue their current levels of state funding despite the tight budget situation.

Among the other presenters were organizations ranging from the League Against Cancer to the United Teachers of Dade. Most organizations came in an effort to maintain current levels of funding they receive from the state, while others came with policy issues.

The meeting was attended by Delegation Chair Juan Zapata, Delegation Vice-Chair Luis Garcia, Senator Frederica Wilson, and Representatives Eddy Gonzalez, Carlos Lopez-Cantera, Erik Fresen, Ronald Brise, Oscar Braynon, James Bush III, Dwight Bullard and Yolly Roberson. In addition, legislative aides were present from the offices of Senators Rudy Garcia, Dan Gelber, and Larcenia Bullard, as well as Representatives Marcelo Llorente, J.C. Planas, Ron Saunders, and Steve Bovo.

OIA worked closely with the office of Representative Zapata in preparation for the meeting. For a complete listing of organizations that presented at the meeting, feel free to contact OIA.

Southeast Florida Delegation Meeting

The Southeast Florida Legislative Delegation, comprised of members of the Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach delegations, will hold a joint meeting on Tuesday February 3 in Tallahassee. At this time, the members of the delegations will identify priorities for the region in the upcoming legislative session. OIA will be present at the meeting to ensure that Miami-Dade County's priorities are included.

House Speaker Ray Sansom Investigation

A grand jury has asked for an investigation into House Speaker Ray Sansom's dealings with Northwest Florida State College. The issue centers around allegations that Sansom accepted a six-figure job with the college in exchange for channeling over \$25 million to the school through last year's budget. He has also been accused of putting \$6 million in the 2007 budget for an aircraft hanger benefitting Jay Odom, a developer and political contributor. Sansom has since resigned the job from the college, but has maintained his innocence.

The grand jury was impaneled by State Attorney Willie Meggs from Tallahassee on the heels of complaints his office received.

Speaker Sansom also faces possible disciplinary action from the state ethics commission. He has hired an attorney to represent him in the investigation as well as another attorney to assist him with the ethics complaint.

BREAKING NEWS ON THE ABOVE ISSUE: *Representative J.C. Planas of the Miami-Dade Legislative Delegation today publicly called on Speaker Sansom to resign. Representative Planas, the first House Republican to publicly ask for the Speaker's resignation, cited the Speaker's inability to properly lead the House while focusing on his legal issues. It has since been reported that the Speaker has been meeting with Republican leaders and may resign as early as this afternoon.*

State Farm Leaving Florida

State Farm announced on Tuesday it will be dropping all of its property insurance customers in Florida over the next 2 years. This move will force nearly 1.2 million policyholders to find new coverage. The company cited its inability to win approval for higher rates from state regulators.

This move could lead to an excessive amount of new customers for Citizens Property Insurance, and place an additional strain on the Florida Hurricane Catastrophe Fund. Critics of this fund have stated it does not have the resources to meet the responsibilities should the state fall victim to a massive storm.

Governor Crist issued the following statement with regard to State Farm's decision: "They probably charge about the highest rates in the state, anyway. I think that Floridians will be much better off without them."

On the heels of this announcement by State Farm, state legislators and insurance regulators have stated they will be working on legislation to limit the amount of customers an insurer can drop in any one year to 2% of its policies.

Committee Meetings

The Florida Legislature will be holding interim committee meetings over the next 3 weeks. OIA will be present in Tallahassee throughout these meetings and meet with legislators and our lobbying team in preparation for the upcoming legislative session.

Update on Legislation

SB 630 by Senator Bennett related to Impact Fees. This bill provides for a 3 year moratorium on the imposition of collection of impact fees by a county or municipality. It was recently referred to the following committees: Community Affairs, Finance and Tax, Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations, and the Policy and Steering Committee on Ways and Means. As of now, there is no House companion. Senator Bennett chairs the first committee of reference, Community Affairs.

HB 501 by Representative Evers related to Early Learning. This bill would abolish Early Learning Coalitions and transfers their functions to the Agency for Workforce Innovation. There is no Senate companion as of yet, and the bill has yet to be referred to committee.

SB 1000 by Senator Fasano and HB 365 by Representative Hooper related to Discretionary Sales Surtaxes/Fire Rescue Services. This legislation would authorize counties that provide fire rescue to impose a 1% sales surtax to support these services. The bill requires a referendum vote on the surtax and a reduction in property taxes to offset the sales surtax revenue. These are identical bills. Neither bill has been referred to committee yet.

SB 1030 by Senator Garcia and HB 545 by Representative Garcia related to Motor Vehicle Lights. These bills provide for vehicles owned, operated or leased by any county correctional agency to show or display blue lights when responding to an emergency. Neither of these bills have been referred to committee.

