



NEWS

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LEGISLATURE FOND OF BUDGET TURKEYS ***While State Revenues Dwindle and Property Tax Hikes Abound***

TALLAHASSEE — Ignoring a warning by its own leaders that member projects would not be funded in this unusually tight fiscal year, the Florida Legislature this session passed a budget containing 507 budget turkeys identified by Florida TaxWatch, worth \$267.3 million dollars. That's the third largest number in the 24 years the non-partisan, non-profit taxpayers research institute has been counting budget turkeys. As a final step to protect taxpayers, it is urging the Governor to use his line-item veto later this week, before he signs the \$71.9 billion budget.

"These willful diversions of an established lawful prioritized planning and budgeting process hurt the ordinary taxpayers and circumvent such core foundation values such as accountability, fairness, and efficiency in our state government," said Dominic M. Calabro, President & CEO of the government watchdog group. "Budget turkeys divert taxpayer money from core essential state functions."

A budget turkey is an appropriation, usually a legislative member project, that violates the integrity and transparency of the budgeting process. These are items that didn't get the review necessary to ensure competition, prioritization, and accountability of the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

"The turkeys reveal the culture that political might makes right," said Calabro. "The most influential members get what they want, whether it's meritorious or been properly reviewed. This is not the way to ensure high public stewardship and taxpayer accountability," said Calabro.

Calabro points out that the practice this year is "particularly disappointing" to taxpayers, following the Legislature's decision to pass a \$546 million increase in property taxes by way of local school districts. The large flock of budget turkeys also comes at a time when state revenue is coming up millions of dollars short of estimates, creating potential for future shortfalls.

Examples of some of the budget turkeys Florida TaxWatch researchers found in the 429-page budget:

- \$1.5 million that includes increased costs for printing the Drivers License Handbook,
- \$2 million for the Wakulla Expo, a civic center in rural Wakulla County,
- \$900,000 for a Gospel Complex for Education in Fort Lauderdale,
- \$1.3 million for the Las Olas Streetscape beautification project in Fort Lauderdale,
- \$300,000 for the Professional Golf Association, a private national organization based in Palm Beach Gardens,
- \$500,000 for the Indian River County Shooting Range, and
- \$840,000 for Exponica International 2007, a Latin American festival and exposition in Miami.

(MORE)

The TaxWatch Budget Turkeys are projects that include one or more examples of:

- Projects that did not go through review and selection processes that are established in state law or rule. Examples include transportation, school construction and local parks. Projects that go through the process but are funded ahead of higher priority projects (as determined by the process) can also be turkeys.
- Appropriations that were inserted in the budget during conference committee deliberations, meaning they did not appear in either the Senate or House final budget.
- Subsidies to private organizations, councils or committees that can and should obtain funding from private sources.
- Local government projects benefiting local area residents but lacking significant local funding support and/or overall benefit to the state as a whole.
- Appropriations that circumvent competition and mandate that a specific vendor or project receive funding.
- Projects or programs added late in the process that bypass legitimate review and proper evaluation because they were not in an agency budget request or the governor's recommended budget or were not heard in legislative committees.
- Other turkeys may include: appropriations from inappropriate trust funds, duplicative appropriations and appropriations contingent on legislation that did not pass

To allow for legislative initiative, any items that were funded in both the House and Senate budgets that serve a legitimate state function were not designated as budget turkeys, except under special circumstances, such as bypassing an established competitive selection process for local projects.

The "Budget Turkey" label doesn't condemn the budget item's worthiness. "There are some projects of tremendous public benefit, which makes you wonder why they get funded as an after-thought, in what is supposed to be a thoughtful, deliberative process," said Calabro. "The Governor has to weigh these concerns and question whether this is the best use of Florida taxpayers' dollars, given our state's vast and pressing needs and limited resources."

The Florida TaxWatch review noted that there appears to be potentially meritorious social service projects but there is a lack of process for evaluating priorities. TaxWatch is not recommending a straight veto of these appropriations, rather a close review instead by the Governor. TaxWatch is going to recommend a process similar to the one the organization helped the legislature create for historical grants funding.

Of the \$267.3 million in turkeys, \$123.9 million were found in General Revenue and \$143.4 million in Trust Funds. This year's turkeys cost \$36 for each Florida family and cost every man, woman and child in Florida \$14. Past Governors have vetoed as many as 80% of Florida TaxWatch Budget Turkeys in past years' budgets.

Florida TaxWatch researchers pointed out that the \$274.7 million in turkeys could be better spent elsewhere to:

- **Build Schools.** \$100 million could build two elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools.
- **Flu Vaccines.** \$37 million could have bought a stockpile of flu vaccines.

- **State Employees.** In a year when employees did not receive a pay raise, but instead got a \$1,000 bonus, \$194 million could have doubled that bonus.
- **Hire Teachers.** \$100 million could hire 2,500 additional teachers (at an average salary of \$40,000).
- **Student Funding.** \$250 million could increase per student funding for K-12 by \$100.
- **Healthy Kids.** \$182 million could draw down federal match dollars to provide an estimated 500,000 uninsured Florida children with health insurance through KidCare.
- **Healthy Start.** \$35 million would enable Florida's Healthy Start Coalitions to draw down \$24.6 million to serve 100% of low-income mothers and infants.

"Governor Crist rightly puts a high premium on government accountability and efficiency," said Calabro. "These budget turkeys circumvent that high standard of taxpayer service."

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MEDIA NOTE: You may view the 2007 Turkey Watch Report online at www.FloridaTaxWatch.org along with a breakdown of the turkeys sorted by line item number and by county.

Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan research institute that over its 28 year history has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens' hard-earned tax dollars. Our mission is to provide the citizens of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and education on government revenues, expenditures, taxation, public policies and programs and to increase the productivity and accountability of Florida Government. On the web at www.FloridaTaxWatch.org.