Florida TaxWatch Releases The 2010 Turkey Watch Report

The annual budget analysis requests Governor Crist veto more than $60 million in spending on behalf of Florida’s taxpayers

TALLAHASSEE — In a state budget fraught with service cuts, trust fund raids, and a lack of sufficient investment in important state functions such as transportation infrastructure and education, Florida TaxWatch has identified more than $60 million in spending on 41 member projects and other budget provisions historically referred to as “turkeys” in the FY 2010-11 Budget, according to the 2010 Florida TaxWatch Turkey Watch Report released today.

The annual report, produced by the nonpartisan, nonprofit research institute and government watchdog Florida TaxWatch, spotlights legislative projects placed in the budget without proper opportunity for public review and debate, which circumvent lawfully established procedures, or which non-competitively benefit a very limited special interest or local area of the state. The “budget turkey” label does not condemn a project’s worthiness, but instead focuses on the budget process, including instances where the Legislature has not followed its own policies and procedures to ensure the highest standards of taxpayer accountability and government efficiency.

“The taxpayers of Florida cannot afford more than $60 million to fund these budget turkeys, especially not during these difficult economic times when their money is so badly needed for housing and feeding families and to invest in and maintain the businesses they created that generate jobs and fuel Florida’s economy,” explained Dominic M. Calabro, President and CEO of Florida TaxWatch. “The turkey list represents the idea that taxpayers should not be forced to fund projects that circumvent the established appropriations process, which is designed to ensure that they are a sound investment of the people’s hard earned money, and do not provide statewide benefit for all Floridians, so I call on the Governor to protect taxpayers from funding these turkeys while so many Floridians are having trouble funding their own basic necessities by exercising the constitutional authority of the line item veto vested in him alone. Funding core
Calabro explained that coming into this session, legislators and other experts had warned that this year’s budget would be one of the tightest in Florida’s history, with a projected shortfall of billions of dollars. However, since the beginning of the legislative session in March, the likely extension of temporarily increased federal funding has enabled more projects to be funded than originally expected and the implementation of more than of the 25 recommendations made by the Florida TaxWatch Government Cost Savings Task Force helped free up much-needed funds. “Nonetheless, in such a tight budget year, Floridians cannot afford to fund this type of parochialism,” added Calabro. “While I commend the Legislature on implementing so many of the recommendations of the Government Cost Savings Task Force, these turkeys indicate a lack of fiscal discipline in this budget,” he summarized.

This year’s turkey is relatively small compared to recent history, but it is an increase from last year’s $15 million total. The increase is surprising – not only because of the tight fiscal situation – but because prior to the session, both the House Speaker and Senate President told members that there was no money for member projects and there would not be a Community Budget Issue Request (CBIR) process this year.

As was the case last year, there was much uncertainty about how much revenue was going to be available for the budget, due to the anticipated extra federal Medicaid assistance (FMAP). Given these circumstances, and the fact that the House and Senate took very different approaches to developing their respective budgets, the Florida TaxWatch review allowed for a bit more legislative discretion for appropriations added late in the process, especially those that are for state operations or programs that have been historically funded.

The 2010 turkey consists largely of appropriations to specific organizations that were added in conference and appropriations that bypassed established selection processes or competitive bidding. Most of these projects could be considered local member projects.
What Else Could A Turkey Buy?

One of the best arguments for stopping turkeys is the many essential state services to which the funds spent on budget turkeys could otherwise have been appropriated. The value of the opportunity cost of state funds is especially high this year, when many core government services suffered funding cuts. Here are just a few alternatives to turkeys.

- **Saving Transportation Jobs** – Reduce the raid of the State Transportation Trust Fund by almost half, which would save approximately 60 jobs per million dollars not raided or more than 4,000 jobs.

- **Restore Funding Cuts to Programs Serving Vulnerable Floridians:**
  - $14.4 million for adoption subsidies to families that adopt foster children that was eliminated
  - $2.6 million was Healthy Start coalitions, serving at-risk pregnant women and infants, that was cut
  - $10 million for Healthy Families, which prevents child abuse and neglect, which was cut. Approximately 4,500 families are expected to be dropped from the program.

- **Student Funding** – $60 million could increase per student funding for K-12 by $22.68 (60,000,000/2,645,079.41)

- **Teachers/Education** – Every $1 million could provide one of the following:
  - 18 additional teachers (at an average salary and benefits of $55,000)
  - qualified Voluntary Pre-K teachers for 35 half-day classes
  - 100,000 hours of direct tutoring time
  - 2,000 computers
  - 18,000 new textbooks

Click here to view The 2010 Florida TaxWatch Turkey Watch Report
Click here to view the Turkey List Spreadsheet

Media Note: Dominic M. Calabro and Kurt Wenner are available for questions and interviews; please contact Robert Weissert at 850-222-5052 to arrange availability. Pictures of the release event are available from Florida TaxWatch.

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Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan research institute that over its 30-year history has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens’ hard-earned tax dollars. Its 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 state and local government. Its support comes from homeowners and retirees, small and large businesses, philanthropic foundations, and professional associations. On the web at www.FloridaTaxWatch.org.