Florida TaxWatch

NEWS

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A BOUNTIFUL TURKEY HARVEST
Budget Turkey Dollars Match All Time High

TALLAHASSEE – The struggle to find funding for vital state services didn't keep Florida lawmakers from stuffing turkeys into the tight budget for fiscal year 2002-2003. A preliminary list of "budget turkeys" released today by Florida TaxWatch highlights nearly $300 million in projects that should have gone on the Governor's line item chopping block.

The annual turkey report spotlights member projects placed in the budget without proper public review; which circumvent competition and the lawfully established procedures; which benefit a very limited special interest or local area of the state or are low priority items that get funded over higher priority needs. To allow for legislative discretion, any items that were funded in both the House and Senate Budget in both the regular and special sessions were not designated as turkeys.

In the preliminary analysis, TaxWatch researchers have identified 445 budget turkeys in the 2002-2003 budget totaling just over $297 million. That figure is close to last year's record turkey crop. It took a special session for lawmakers to finally reach agreement on their budget, but the Governor used only nine of his allotted 15 days to review the budget and exercise his line-item veto power.

"The Governor is the last line of defense for Florida taxpayers to assure their hard-earned dollars are spent in the most efficient and cost-effective manner," said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch. "Florida TaxWatch has been on the hunt for budget turkeys for 19 years now, and we hope the Governor shares our commitment to root out pet projects and those that have not met appropriate levels of review."

According to the Florida Constitution, the only bill that has to pass each year is the budget. Florida TaxWatch began its annual "turkey hunt" in 1983, providing the Governor with a list of recommended budget vetoes. Operating under a shortened timeframe, TaxWatch provided a preliminary list today and will release the final report in the coming days.

"If more turkeys make it past the Governor's veto this year, it will not be surprising," Calabro said. "We typically see more member projects make it into the final budget in election years, particularly during gubernatorial election years."

Calabro said the discovery of additional available funds during the special session also contributed to the large serving of turkey in the budget. Projects added during the special session often did not meet the same high standards for review, and thus are included on the turkey list.

As in previous years, it is important to note that the "budget turkey" label does not denote condemnation of a budget item's worthiness. The term merely suggests that with the state's vast and pressing needs, and limited resources, the question must be asked, "Is this the best use of Floridians' state tax dollars?"

This and previous Turkey Watch reports are not attempts to record only government waste or inefficiency. While in some cases that may be a factor, this year's report offers an independent assessment about the honesty, integrity and public review of the state's $50.4 billion 2002-2003 budget. Florida TaxWatch points out without an appropriate review process there is no fiscal integrity and accountability to citizens' hard-earned tax dollars.

One of the most important arguments for stopping turkeys is to protect the many urgently needed state services that the funds spent on turkeys would otherwise purchase. The nearly $300 million now appropriated for budget turkeys, could be used for:

- Foster care caseworkers. $500,000 would provide six additional counselors, one supervisor and one support staff.
- Education. $150 million could increase per-student spending by $65.
- Nutrition-related health services. $10 million could provide services to 14,000 additional poor mothers and their children in the WIC program.
- Crime prevention services. $20 million would extend services to 12,000 additional at risk youth.
- Performance bonuses for state workers. $41 million could provide the full amount needed for performance-based businesses under the Governor's Service First reform initiative.
- Healthy Start. $10 million would provide services to 22,000 additional clients.

For more information about this year's turkeys, check out the Florida TaxWatch website at: www.floridataxwatch.org.

Florida TaxWatch is a 22-year-old statewide, non-partisan, non-profit research institution supported by homeowners, small businesses, corporations, labor, individuals and philanthropic foundations. Florida TaxWatch is a public interest group dedicated to improving citizen understanding and government accountability.

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