



NEWS

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LAWMAKERS GIVE UP TURKEY IN 2003-2004 *Budget light on special projects, but still cause for concern*

TALLAHASSEE – Florida lawmakers managed to create what appears to be a “budget turkey-free” spending plan for the coming fiscal year. After four years of record turkey stuffing in the state budget—during which Governor Bush concurred and vetoed hundreds of millions of special projects--the Turkey Watch Report issued today by Florida TaxWatch finds no traditional turkeys in the 2003-2004 spending plan that meet TaxWatch’s strict criteria and definition which have been used since 1983.

The annual report spotlights budget items meeting one or more criteria: member projects placed in the budget without proper public review; projects that circumvent competition and lawfully established procedures; projects that benefit a very limited special interest or local area of the state; or projects that are low priority items that get funded over higher priority needs.

This year marks just the second time a budget has been declared turkey free since TaxWatch’s annual turkey hunt began in 1983. The last time was in 1991-92 during a tight budget year when the Governor and legislative leadership honored their commitment for a “no turkey budget.”

“The Senate leadership declared a moratorium on member projects early on and held fast to its position,” said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch. “In the end, all legislators are to be commended for putting aside parochial spending for at least one year.”

According to TaxWatch, while the extremely tight budget year contributed to the absence of turkeys, it was not the only factor.

“In last year’s only slightly better fiscal situation, the Legislature managed to include a record \$297 million in turkeys,” Calabro said. “This budget reflects a clear understanding that turkeys had no place in this year’s budget, which is provided by the hard working families and small and large enterprises alike.”

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Unfortunately, the turkey-free designation does not mean that each appropriation in the budget is good or that the Legislature's spending plan truly reflects the state's priorities.

"Lawmakers have to make a lot of hard choices when numerous worthy programs are competing for limited dollars," Calabro said. "It's much like a waiting list for a transplant. Fairness dictates that someone at the bottom of the list should not move to the head of the line based on political connections or social or economic status."

TaxWatch is also very concerned about the methods used to balance this year's state budget. Lawmakers transferred hundreds of millions of dollars from trust funds and other non-recurring revenue sources to general revenue – something Florida TaxWatch has long warned against.

"When you use revenue from a source that is not going to be there next year to pay for a program that will be recurring, it will make it all the more difficult to balance the budget the next time," Calabro said. "The use of non-recurring funds hatches serious fiscal problems that will come home to roost next spring, when lawmakers will start off with a \$1.3 billion budget hole to fill just to maintain state functions at current levels."

As in past years, the Turkey Watch report is not simply an attempt to record government waste or inefficiency. It is an independent assessment of the honesty, integrity and public review of the budgeting process by which the state's \$53.5 billion 2003-2004 budget was enacted. Florida TaxWatch points out that without an appropriate and prioritized review process, there is no assurance of fiscal integrity and accountability for citizens' hard-earned tax dollars.

"We applaud the Legislature for largely putting aside local concerns for the good of the state as a whole, and commend Governor Jeb 'Veto Corleone' Bush for vetoing hundreds of millions of dollars in TaxWatch-tagged budget turkeys in the last four years," Calabro said. "These actions have paid off this year. We would be naïve to believe turkeys are off the legislative menu for good, but hopefully the heightened debate will make lawmakers more hesitant to place local projects in future budgets without following proper review, competition and a deliberate and fair-minded prioritization process."

Florida TaxWatch is a 23-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, government accountability and taxpayer value.

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