



NEWS

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\$240 MILLION WORTH OF “TURKEYS” IN STATE BUDGET *As Revenue Increased, So Did Budget Turkeys*

TALLAHASSEE — In a year that saw a record increase in unexpected revenue, Florida’s budget has almost twice the number of budget turkeys as last year. That’s the finding of Florida TaxWatch, which identified 413 budget turkeys costing \$240-million, turkeys that the non-partisan, non-profit taxpayers research institute urges the Governor’s consideration for his line-item chopping block.

“This was a peculiar year for Florida, with an extra \$2-billion in unanticipated revenue available to spend late in the budgeting process, which followed another nearly \$4-billion windfall,” said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch, at a morning news conference. “Although the number of budget turkeys almost doubled from last year, the dollar amount was less than feared given the unprecedented budget hike of \$4.5 billion or 7.7%.”

A Budget Turkey, under the strict procedural criteria of Florida TaxWatch, is a project that meets one or more of the following criteria: it is placed in the budget without proper public review; it circumvents competition and the legislatively established procedures; it benefits 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 budgets that serve a legitimate state function were not designated as budget turkeys, unless they bypassed an established competitive selection process or were an inappropriate use of state funds.

“Budget Turkeys are examples of appropriations of taxpayers’ hard-earned money that violate the integrity of the budgeting process and the transparency in budget decisions,” said Calabro. “If it has the review by the Legislature and has transparency, competition, prioritization, and accountability, it may not be a desirable budget expenditure, but it’s not a ‘budget turkey’ under TaxWatch’s rigorous criteria.”

Of the \$240.3 million in turkeys, \$97.9 million were found in General Revenue and \$142.4 million in Trust Funds. This amounts to approximately four-tenths of one percent of the \$63.1 billion state budget. This year’s turkeys cost \$35 for each Florida family and cost every man, woman and child in Florida \$14.

This year saw a return of budget turkeys in an area of the budget once famous for them – transportation projects. “This is disturbing because there is a very good planning and budgeting process for the Department of Transportation that has limited the number of turkeys in recent years,” said Kurt Wenner,

Florida TaxWatch Senior Research Analyst and author of the “2005 Turkey Watch Report”. “This year has a return to the circumvention of this well-established process,” added Wenner.

“From local road widening projects to historic district redevelopment, millions of dollars worth of decisions are being made by a few legislators, hidden in a budget of thousands of appropriations,” said Calabro. “Governor Bush in past years has been wise to veto such questionable projects and we urge him to do likewise this year.”

The Governor has vetoed as many as 80% of Florida TaxWatch Budget Turkeys in past years’ budgets.

Examples of some of the more questionable expenditures this year:

- \$4-million for relocation of the Salvador Dali Museum
- \$950,000 for the Institute for Human and Machine Cognition Hurricane Damage
- \$600,000 for Florida Pork Producers

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.”

Florida TaxWatch researchers pointed out that the \$240.3 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.
- **Hire Teachers.** \$50 million could hire 1,300 additional teachers (at a median salary of \$37,300).
- **Student Funding.** \$50 million could increase per student funding for K-12 by \$19.
- **Healthy Kids.** \$50 million could provide the state and federal share for more than 35,000 children to have health insurance.

The state budget totaled \$63.1 billion, an increase of 7.7%, or \$4.5 billion over last year’s budget, outpacing all measures of Florida’s substantial economic growth. The state budget grew at a rate more than double the combined economic growth rate of 3.5% (inflation multiplied by population growth rate) and more than the most expansive measure of Florida’s economy, personal income of Floridians of 6%.

“Some of these Budget Turkeys appear to be meritorious projects,” said Calabro. “But often they were never compared as they should have been with like-minded projects. Instead, they were decided on the whims of legislative conferees. There was no question: ‘Is this the best bang for the buck?’” said Calabro.

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MEDIA NOTE: You may view the 2005 Turkey Watch Report online at www.floridatwatch.org along with a breakdown of the turkeys sorted by line item number and by county, together with our new Citizen Primer: “A Taxpayer’s Guide to Florida Government Budgeting”, which provides an explanation of the state budgeting process together with a history of reforms and policies that are supposed to ensure an open and deliberative process.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute that over its 25 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.floridatwatch.org