



NEWS

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CONTACT: Robert Weissert
Director of Communications
& External Relations
850-222-5052, ext. 20
850-321-5052 (cell)
robert@floridataxwatch.org

Florida TaxWatch Annual Turkey Watch Report Finds Over \$100 Million in Budget Turkeys in Tightest Budget

TALLAHASSEE — Despite deep and widespread cuts to core government functions in the Fiscal Year 2009 Budget, the annual Turkey Watch Report, released today by the non-partisan government watchdog Florida TaxWatch, identifies 132 projects worth \$110 million that circumvented the normal budget process and were funded in a lean budget year when core services were cut and fees increased.

“The story here is that a \$6 billion budget reduction, which will significantly affect many basic functions of state government, only reduced the prevalence of budget turkeys but did not stop them outright,” explained Dominic M. Calabro, President & CEO of Florida TaxWatch, the non-partisan, non-profit research institute and government watchdog that publishes the annual report. “Although this year’s flock of budget turkeys is much smaller than last year’s, it will still shock most people that there are more than \$100 million worth of budget turkeys in one of Florida’s most austere budgets since the great depression – that is in the context of a precipitous decline of \$8 billion from 2 years ago,” Calabro added.

A budget turkey is an appropriation – usually a legislative member project – that circumvents the legitimate budgeting process. By avoiding the time and transparency of the full budget process, these items were not subjected to the scrutiny needed to ensure efficiency, accountability, and proper prioritization when appropriating the taxpayer’s money. (See page 3 of the 2008 Florida TaxWatch Budget Turkey Report for examples of what types of appropriations are labeled turkeys.)

While many areas of the budget that are historically ripe with turkeys had few or none this year, other areas maintained, or exceeded, their recent levels. The budget for the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) led the way with a number of local parks and recycling projects that bypassed the normal selection process. Twenty-four local water projects that did not meet the recently loosened statutory criteria are also on the list. Most puzzling is \$3.2 million in general revenue that was added in conference for land acquisition. It is not clear what property the state is to buy, although legislative intent seems to point to Bailey’s Mill in Jefferson County, which has not been evaluated by DEP.

There were also a number of projects that were not part of the Department of Transportation’s Work Program, which reflects a discouraging, and growing, recent trend.

Calabro points out that the practice this year is “especially disappointing,” given the unprecedented drop in state revenues. The same budget that funds these 132 projects worth \$110 million cuts \$332 million from K-12 education, or \$131 (1.8%) per student; cuts payments to hospitals serving the poor by \$250

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million; and cuts nursing home payments by \$164 million. Additionally, the budget increases fees-for-services (such as court filing fees) by more than \$200 while increasing tuition across the university system by 6 percent. And there were no pay raises for most state employees (except for a 5 percent increase for state troopers).

This current flock of budget turkeys also emerges at a time when state revenue is coming up millions of dollars short of estimates, creating potential for future shortfalls in the current budget year. As a final step to protect taxpayers, TaxWatch is urging Governor Crist to exercise his constitutionally authorized line-item veto power in order to decrease the risk that the state will need to tap into the reserve trust fund.

“While the millions of dollars saved by vetoing projects like these cannot be used to restore the funding of the core functions of state government at this time, these vetoes will help protect the state’s reserve funds and ensure that the people do not experience further reductions in services that would jeopardize their health, welfare, and safety, or suffer crippling tax increases in the near future,” Calabro explained. “With respect to fiscal discipline over earmarks in the state budget, Governor Crist has demonstrated that he talks the talk and walks the walk of protecting taxpayers’ hard-earned money. This budget will require the kind of fiscal discipline and restraint that the Governor has shown only he can provide,” Calabro added.

In 2007, Governor Crist vetoed 68% of the 507 projects identified as budget turkeys in the 2007 Florida TaxWatch Budget Turkey Report. That represented 58% of the total value of the \$267.3 million in budget turkeys. Past Governors have vetoed as many as 80% of Florida TaxWatch Budget Turkeys in past years’ budgets.

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 underlying principle of this report is not to illuminate questionable projects, but rather to highlight the fact that the taxpayers of Florida deserve to know that their hard-earned money is being spent wisely and appropriately, and the best way to ensure that that to protect the integrity of the budget *process*,” Calabro said.

Of the \$110 million in turkeys, \$90.7 million are funded from Trust Funds while another \$19.8 million are funded from General Revenue. In the report, Florida TaxWatch researchers point out that the \$110 million in turkeys could have been spent elsewhere by the Legislature to fund:

- **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
- **Student Funding.** \$100 million could increase per student funding for K-12 by more than \$38.
- **Restoring Budget Cuts in Childrens’ Program.** \$18 million could restore the budget cuts to School Readiness and After School Programs, Healthy Families, Day Treatment Facilities and Children/Families in Need programs.
- **Back to School Sales Tax Holiday (7 days) - \$23.4 million**
- **Hurricane Preparedness Sales Tax Holiday (7 days) - \$12.3 million**

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Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan research institute that over its 29 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.