



NEWS

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FLORIDA'S GOVERNMENT WATCHDOG REACHES QUARTER CENTURY MARK *Florida TaxWatch Has Been the Eyes and Ears of Taxpayers*

TALLAHASSEE — What began 25 years ago with a desire by legislators and business to curb state government spending has evolved today into Florida's premier government watchdog, with an impressive record of saving taxpayers more than \$6.2 billion over the years—approximately \$1,067 for every Florida family.

And along the way, the Florida TaxWatch Research Institute has helped constructively shape policy in the areas of taxation, spending, health, education, prisons, transportation, tourism, and local government issues. This "taxpayer's best friend" as it's known, begins its 25th anniversary year tomorrow.

"The big thing was to enlighten the business community on how government money was spent and what the taxation purposes were," said Phil Lewis, who served as Florida Senate President from 1978-1980. "There was an effort to lower taxes and not worry about the spending. I maintained back then if you concerned yourself with spending, the taxes would take care of themselves," said Lewis, who was one of TaxWatch's six founders and currently serves on its Executive Committee.

Lewis teamed with fellow Senator Ken Plante, J.E. Davis and T. Wayne Davis of Winn-Dixie Stores and Publix Super Markets founder George Jenkins and President Mark Hollis to form the Citizens Council for Budget Research, which was later renamed Florida TaxWatch.

"Florida TaxWatch has enjoyed unusual successes these past 25 years, mostly because its founders established an organization that would, without lobbying, look out for the interests of all the taxpayers, whether they're senior citizens, hardworking families, or employees of businesses, large and small alike," said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch.

"They were dedicated to making sure Florida government spent the money of Floridians very wisely, help them get more bang for the dollar, and help make government more accountable," said Calabro, who has been with the organization for 24 years.

Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, non-partisan, non-profit, independent government watchdog. The eyes and ears of Florida's taxpayers, its quality research and relevant recommendations have helped state government shape fiscal and public policy for the benefit of all of its citizens.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by all types of taxpayers -- homeowners, small businesses, corporations, professional firms, labor organizations, associations, individuals and philanthropic foundations -- representing a wide spectrum of nearly 1000 Florida's citizens. It's funded mostly from their contributions and philanthropic grants.

"I think that TaxWatch has made a greater contribution to the awareness of the necessity for a broad based participation by those who are involved in the delivery of government," said former Governor Wayne Mixson, who serves on the Florida TaxWatch Board of Trustees. "A broad army of participants have become aware of the fact that they can do something about increasing the efficiency of government and that somebody does care."

One of the things that Florida TaxWatch is best known for is its "Budget Turkeys". Each year TaxWatch releases a listing of legislative turkey items funded in the state budget. They represent spending of questionable value on a statewide level. Florida TaxWatch has identified more than \$700 million in "Budget Turkeys" vetoed by Florida Governor's since 1983.

"Our members have pressure put on them every single day to spend more money," said Allan Bense, Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, in an address to the Florida TaxWatch Spring Board meeting this year. "When we receive encouragement from TaxWatch and other groups about holding the line and keeping the faith, that's what keeps us going."

Florida TaxWatch is also dedicated to informing the public as to what is good and noteworthy about state government. Each Spring, the organization recognizes and celebrates the accomplishments of state employees whose efforts and ideas generate significant government cost-savings for the taxpayers, through its Prudential Financial Davis Productivity Awards.

Founded in 1989 through the vision and generosity of the late J.E. and A.D. Davis of Winn Dixie Stores, and later by Prudential Financial, the program has given more than 8,000 state employees, teams and work units the recognition they deserve for their efforts to measurably increase productivity and promote innovation in state government for added taxpayer value of \$4.8 billion dollars.

"Recognizing those employees in state government who say we can do this better and cheaper is a great return on investment for Florida's taxpayers," said Lt. Governor Toni Jennings, who serves as Chairman of the Prudential Financial Davis Productivity Awards. At the June 2004 awards ceremony in Tallahassee, Jennings told the audience of 700 recipients, their bosses and invited guests and dignitaries "We don't thank state government workers enough. Their foresight, insight and hard work make things better for us all."

Tax Freedom Day is another way that Florida TaxWatch shows citizens how long and hard they have to work to pay their federal, state and local taxes. Thus, giving them a clear understanding of the impact of government on each citizen's pocketbook. While the date is moving back on the calendar, the average Floridian still toils for more than three months, or 111 out of 366 days, to pay their taxes.

Florida TaxWatch is also taking a leadership role in improving student achievement in Florida schools, through its Center for Educational Performance & Accountability. The Center has launched a major multi-year research initiative, designed to rethink, redefine, and re-tool Florida's public education system. An advisory committee of 36 of the best and brightest citizens in the fields of education, civic service, and business are looking beyond the funding of public education to the quality taxpayers get in return for the

investment, as well as the environmental factors and structure that play a role in the process of public education in Florida.

“Florida TaxWatch today is extremely well-respected and admired in its advice,” said Tom Slade, Chairman of the Center’s Advisory Committee and a member of the TaxWatch Board of Trustees. “Today the institution of Florida TaxWatch makes a marvelous impact upon the policy centers of Florida and the return on investment is greater than it’s ever been,” said Slade.

Earlier this year, Florida TaxWatch researched and outlined the need for proper funding, management and accountability of the state courts prior to their transition from county to state budget responsibility. “TaxWatch is actively engaged in striving to be the best at all times and is setting the curve for the rest of the citizens of Florida,” said former Florida Supreme Court Justice Harry Lee Anstead.

The tax watchdog also weighed-in this year against a second attempt to eliminate many of the sales and use tax exemptions on the books. TaxWatch called it an attempted shortcut of due process that would’ve put Florida taxpayers at a clear and overwhelming disadvantage, with a multi-billion dollar hidden tax hike.

Florida TaxWatch has gained a historical understanding of state government, public policy issues, and the battles fought in the past necessary to structure effective solutions for today and the future.

“So both for our elected leadership and our incoming staff, I think TaxWatch will serve the citizens best in Florida by playing an educational role to governing in Florida and what our major budget means and how to go about doing that with good policy decisions,” said Janegale Boyd, a former legislator and current member of the Florida TaxWatch Board of Trustees.

TaxWatch will continue to help save money for Florida taxpayers. With post 911-tourism impacts, the recent hurricanes, and the growing population and its need for services, great challenges and opportunities exist on the horizon for Florida. TaxWatch will be there, with its credible research and sage advice.

Tomorrow evening, at a Tallahassee gala attended by its founders, past Governors, past and current legislators, and many of its members, Florida TaxWatch will renew its mission to provide world-class, independent research and education that improves taxpayer value, citizen understanding, and government accountability. They fulfill that mission today as they have in the past, by conducting and publishing empiric research that highlights economic and fiscal problems and offering sound, practical, and accountable solutions.

“They are the eyes and ears of the taxpayers, said founder Phil Lewis. “And I think they’ve done an outstanding job.”

Did You Know?

Turkey Watch. Florida TaxWatch has identified more than \$700 million in “Budget Turkeys” vetoed by Florida Governor’s since 1983.

Tax Amnesties. Florida TaxWatch-suggested tax amnesties in 1987-88, 1992 and 2003 have generated more than \$200 million, plus recurring money as former tax evaders became productive contributors to our tax collections.

Tax Limitations. Florida TaxWatch has helped limit government growth by its successful push of a constitutional amendment tying revenue collections to growth in personal income.

Intangibles Tax. Florida TaxWatch Task Forces led the way in reducing and nearly eliminating the outdated state intangibles tax.

State Retirement Fund. Florida TaxWatch research prompted changes in the state pension fund that increased returns by \$6 billion dollars over eight years.

Taxpayers' Bill of Rights. Florida TaxWatch developed the Taxpayer Bill of Rights and the Property Taxpayers Bill of Rights, simplifying the rights of all Florida taxpayers and creating a Taxpayer Advocate within the Department of Revenue.

Sales & Use Tax Amendments. A Florida TaxWatch legal challenge in 2002 helped thwart a constitutional amendment to raise sales and use taxes. TaxWatch successfully fought a second attempt in 2004, which would have potentially raised billions of dollars in taxes.

Prudential Financial - Davis Productivity Awards. Florida TaxWatch and its Prudential Financial Davis Productivity Awards have given more than 8,000 state employees, teams and work units the recognition they deserve for their efforts to measurably increase productivity and promote innovation in state government for added taxpayer value of \$4.8 billion dollars.

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MEDIA NOTE: Historic pictures of Florida TaxWatch founders, past Governors, and other events in the history of the organization are available for your use, as well as dubs of our 25th Anniversary History video. Additionally we have video and soundbites with past Governors, chairmen and other guests from our 25th Anniversary Gala on November 17th in Tallahassee. Please call with your interest.