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HOUSE TED COMMITTEE APPROVES TRANSPORT SURCHARGE

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THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, March 16, 2010.....Over strong objection from transportation advocates and Democrats, the House Transportation and Economic Development Committee voted Tuesday to reinstitute a surcharge on the transportation fund that was eliminated years ago.

Opponents of the 8 percent fee on the gas tax collections in the state, which fund road construction projects for the Department of Transportation, told the panel the idea was a job-killer. But Republicans, lead by Committee Chair Rep. Rich Glorioso, countered that bringing back the recurring surcharge, which was eliminated by former Gov. Jeb Bush to spur transportation investment in the state, would bring in about \$150 million in a year the state faces a nearly \$3 billion budget shortfall.

Before approving the measure on a party line vote, the House TED committee heard at length from transportation industries and business groups that decreasing investment in transportation would make a bad economy worse.

“These roads that crisscross our state are the veins and arteries of our economy,” Florida Trucking Association President Mary Lou Rajchel said. “For every \$1 billion invested by state governments on highway construction and improvements, more than 27,000 jobs are created.”

Florida Ports Council Vice-President Mike Rubin agreed, urging lawmakers to “trim responsibly with a fine-eye rather than an all-encompassing heavy-handed approach.”

“This is not a deferral of money for transportation funding,” he said. “This is money that is completely gone and will not be coming back once removed. These transportation projects, some of which are in the very districts you serve, won’t come back.”

Democrats slammed the proposal as well. Rep. Maria Sachs, D-Delray Beach, said “this is not a wise policy decision or social decision,” citing the same statistics as the transportation advocates who spoke before her.

But Republicans like Rep. Jennifer Carroll, R- Fleming Island, said the panel had little choice, chiding opponents for “not really giving us any suggestions other than taxing a population that is already out of work.”

“This is not an easy pill for us to swallow, but we have to do something,” she said, though she quickly added that she hoped that “in years to come that we stay away from trust funds all together.”

Glorioso, who proposed the plan, echoed the sentiment that the panel was left with little choice but to reactivate the surcharge.

“We’re just one piece of the puzzle,” Glorioso said. “We’re talked about all the other appropriations committees that are meeting. They’re all cutting. The question is if we didn’t do what we’re doing today, how much more they have to cut? How many VPK kids do we have take out of that program? How many kids do we not put in KidCare. What do we give up for this?”

The House TED committee’s budget calls for a separate one-time sweep of another roughly \$270 million out of the transportation trust fund. Neither that proposal nor bringing back the surcharge on the trust fund are included in the Senate’s transportation spending plans.

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