

# TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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### **Fla. Senate passes nearly \$68.6 billion state budget; House is expected to OK it today**

By Jim Ash and Bill Cotterell

The Senate voted 36-0 on Wednesday to approve a \$68.6 billion spending plan, setting up negotiations with the House, where leaders insist on spending \$1 billion less.

Unlike the House, the Senate anticipates \$800 million in federal stimulus dollars for Medicaid and also assumes that the Legislature will bless a gambling deal with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that could bring in another \$412 million.

The Senate assumptions are by no means a certainty and neither spending plan avoids cuts to education, social services and state-worker benefits as lawmakers struggle to plug a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall. Differences between the two chambers' budgets will be negotiated in coming weeks before the April 31 end of session.

"It is no doubt one of the most challenging assignments I ever ran into," said Senate budget chief JD Alexander, R-Lake Wales. "We've had to make the best of choices we have available to us."

The House spending plan would see per-student spending fall from \$6,886 to \$6,814. It would cut higher education by \$148.3 million, or 2 percent.

The House avoids the most catastrophic cuts by sweeping \$788 million from trust funds, about half of that from a road-building fund backed by a 12-cent-a-gallon tax on gasoline. Democratic critics labeled the move the "Job Killing Act of 2010," claiming it would cost 8,000 construction jobs.

Contractors are up in arms and joined Democrats in demanding that the state close tax loopholes or find other sources of revenue.

"Any cuts to the state transportation trust fund will not only destroy an economic-driving industry, it will ruin our state. At some point, we have to pay," Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders' Association, said in a statement.

The House wants to save \$4 million by wiping out the state's 31 Healthy Start Coalitions, programs that provide screening and pre-natal health care to poor women. County-run health departments would pick up the slack, sponsors said.

House health-care chief Denise Grimsley, R-Lake Placid, said the move was necessary to avoid even steeper cuts to Medically Needy, the program for the severely disabled.

Grimsley said House leaders made the decision, at least in part, because disability is a condition and "pregnancy is a choice."

"So, are we going to have county bake sales for pre-natal care?" asked an indignant Rep. Ron Saunders, D-Tavernier.

One of the biggest surprises came early in the day when Senate Republican leaders, who have pledged transparency in the legislative budgeting process, unveiled a sweeping, last-minute attempt to overhaul the state's \$18 billion Medicaid program.

The amendment, by Republican Sens. Mike Haridopolos of Merritt Island, Don Gaetz of Niceville and Joe Negron of Port St. Lucie, would ask the federal government for permission to cap the program in exchange for increasing eligibility to another 2 million recipients and a chance to re-write the rules.

Medicaid recipients would get vouchers for private insurance, taking the state "out of the check-writing business," Negron said. Some would also see co-payments and deductibles.

"It's a way to treat people in the Medicaid program with the same dignity and respect as other people," Negron said.

There is no similar House proposal and the plan stands little chance of passing.

The House is expected to approve its proposed budget today.