



## Legislature raids road trust fund

*Transportation money will be used to help plug budget shortfall*

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By Jim Ash

C.W. Roberts Contracting of Tallahassee is surviving the worst recession since the 1920s with few layoffs, but that luck could change in the next eight days as lawmakers scramble to plug a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall and keep their election-year promise not to raise taxes.

"We've had a few layoffs, less than 10," said company president Chuck Roberts. "But if that money is taken away from the trust fund, and the Department of Transportation doesn't have the ability to let new projects, we will have substantial layoffs."

The company employs 700 workers statewide and 200 in the Big Bend. Protecting those jobs means convincing lawmakers to keep their hands off a shrinking road building fund that is backed by a 12-cent a gallon tax on gasoline, insists the Florida Transportation Builders' Association.

Roberts and more than 400 of his fellow association members donned reflective safety vests and hard hats and walked the halls of the Capitol to argue that road building is the best recession-fighting fuel.

They were a day late.

The night before, word leaked out that House and Senate leaders had agreed to sweep \$160 million from the trust fund, with the Senate backing off its insistence that the money stay put. By late in the evening, in a formal budget conference meeting, the deal was official.

"Once again, that's one of the hard choices we face with a budget that cannot meet all of our needs or desires," said Rep. Gary Aubuchon, R-Naples. Aubuchon is one of the House budget negotiators dealing with transportation issues.

It could have been much worse for the road contractors. The House originally wanted to sweep \$460 million from the fund.

Department of Transportation officials warned that the fund has already been eroded by hard times that have seen gas-tax collections plunge. A recent study by state economists showed that a \$316 loss in tax collections will slow or stall scores of projects statewide.

The list of threatened projects includes a \$10 million runway project for a Southwest Florida airport, a \$12.1 million in construction on Davis Highway in Escambia County and \$50.8 million for improving I-95 in Brevard County, from SR 528 to the Port St. John interchange.

And that was before the \$160 million sweep.

Bob Burleson, president of association, predicted that the legislative decision will cost Florida 11,000 jobs.

"Basically, the trust fund has been the fertilizer for economic gardening," Burleson said. Sen. Thad Altman, a Republican from Viera who is also negotiating transportation issues, praised the Senate for at least limiting the sweep.

"Studies show it's a lot less expensive when you maintain this infrastructure," he said.

Senate President Jeff Atwater, a Republican from North Palm Beach who is running for chief financial officer, didn't mention the agreement to divert the money when he was handed a reflective vest and stood before the cheering association members at a noon rally.

Atwater said the Senate would fight to preserve the trust fund and create jobs.

"We just won't stand for that," Atwater said.

Just a few yards away, reporters asked him about the obvious omission in his speech.

"In this process, it's about finding common ground and give and take," Atwater said. "Yes, I'm responsible."