



Fund Raid May Cost Hundreds of Jobs

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By Catherine Whittenburg

TALLAHASSEE - Lawmakers have said for months that creating jobs is their top priority, but critics say the Legislature's plan to shrink a transportation trust fund will wipe out more than 11,000 jobs.

About 400 transportation construction workers descended on the Capitol on Tuesday to protest a proposed \$160 million raid on the state Transportation Trust Fund. The fund pays for roads and other transportation projects, and that cut, the builders say, could mean the loss of 11,200 jobs for Floridians.

Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders Association, said it was the first such protest his group has staged in 20 years.

"This is a very dire year," he said. "The raid on the trust fund is so significant, and the impact on jobs is so huge. ... It's just so incredible, when the Legislature spends all this time talking about creating jobs."

The cut represents a compromise announced this week between the House's initial plan to drain about \$470 million from the transportation fund, through a combination of transfers, and the Senate's initial plan to leave the fund intact. The Senate historically has been more protective of the fund.

Lawmakers are digging into that and other trust funds to plug holes in the budget for 2010-11, when the state is expected to fall \$3.2 billion short of what it needs to continue core programs and services.

This week, House budget chief David Rivera said the cuts to the transportation fund would not likely hinder any projects in the state's current five-year work plan.

But transportation officials said they already are deferring projects, including some in the Tampa Bay area, because of projected revenue shortfalls.

State analysts have projected this year that drops in fuel taxes and related revenue that feed the transportation fund will fall about \$488 million short of earlier predictions this fiscal year. Any

cuts to the trust fund, Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos warned, will only compound the situation.

That's what worries Mike Horan, president of Ajax Paving Industries of Florida, whose Venice-based company includes factories in Tampa and Sarasota, as well as Pasco and Manatee counties.

"We're already down about 25 percent of our work force just the way it is right now," Horan said. "There's virtually little to no private (sector) work out there right now. ... We're dependent on government work right now."

Senate President Jeff Atwater left out any mention of the \$160-million compromise on the trust fund during his speech to the transportation workers on Tuesday.

Donning a neon-green vest borrowed from a worker in the crowd, Atwater said that lawmakers face tough decisions on the budget but agreed that raiding the transportation fund "will deprive the start date or (eliminate) the job that you or friends are on."

Florida law expressly places certain revenue in trust for transportation and infrastructure, he said. "You're expressing back to us by your presence: Stay true to that. Don't break that trust."

Remember what it stands for - that every dollar that is moved from those trust funds is not just settling up a balance sheet or an income statement."

Moments after the speech, Atwater told reporters that "we've had to ultimately conclude a common ground is going to be in the area of \$160 million" taken from the fund. Tuesday evening, senators negotiating budget issues with the House agreed formally to the \$160 million sweep, with the hope of receiving additional federal stimulus money to shave that figure down to \$120 million.

Some workers left the rally Tuesday afternoon with the impression the Senate was still refusing the cut. Burluson acknowledged that the Senate was expected to concede the \$160 million that evening, "but I think that you've got to. The people that are here with their jobs on the line, they have to have hope."