



Crist vetoes raid of transportation money

May 28, 2010

By Brandon Larrabee

TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Charlie Crist signed a spending plan Friday for the coming budget year but vetoed a raid of the state’s road-building fund, setting up a constitutional showdown with the Legislature with millions of dollars of school funding at stake.

Almost all of Northeast Florida’s projects made it through the process unscathed. The Shands hospital system, which includes a Jacksonville branch, did lose \$9.7 million. Rep. Ronald “Doc” Renuart, R-Ponte Vedra Beach, said it was unclear how the Jacksonville hospital might be affected.

“That can seriously affect our safety net hospital here in Northeast Florida and can put our citizens at risk if services are not available,” Renuart said, though he noted the Shand’s main facility in Gainesville would likely be hardest hit.

Crist’s decision to veto the raid of the transportation trust fund would have triggered a corresponding \$160 million cut to per-student education funding under the budget plan passed by the Legislature last month. But Crist also used his veto pen to strike a line in the budget tying the transportation trust to school spending.

“We should not have to choose between jobs for Floridians or funding for our children’s education,” he wrote in a letter explaining his veto.

Lawmakers believed that the budget language would keep the newly independent Crist from using his veto pen to score political points in his run for an open U.S. Senate race. Following Crist’s attempt to restore the road money without touching education, House Speaker Larry Cretul threatened legal action.

“This apparent abuse of power is another example of the governor once again exceeding his legal authority,” Cretul, R-Ocala said in a statement issued by his office. “The House has successfully challenged the governor when he has exceeded his constitutional authority before, and we are prepared to do so again.”

The state’s road construction industry praised the move.

“By vetoing the trust fund raids, Gov. Crist recognizes that a proper investment in Florida’s transportation system supports our diverse economy and the needs of Floridians. In the midst of rising unemployment rates and a struggling economy, this is one action that surely moves Florida in a positive direction,” said Bob Burleson, president of the Florida Transportation Builders’ Association.

The House had pushed for the transportation trust fund sweep against Senate objections, though the upper chamber relented to a smaller reduction than House members were originally looking for.

A legal challenge might not be the only option, said Sen. Steve Wise, R-Jacksonville. He said legislative leaders would try to decide next week what to do.

“Do you go and sue the governor, or do you go to special session and do a veto override?” said Wise, who chairs the education budget committee in the Senate. “Those are the kinds of discussions that you have to have.”

In all, Crist struck \$371 million in projects from the \$70 billion budget. Most of the projects vetoed were centered — coincidentally or not — in districts of lawmakers who had been particularly critical of Crist. That raised questions about whether he was going after waste or payback, said Rep. Jennifer Carroll, R-Fleming Island.

“If he was so against turkeys ... then he should have cut all of the member projects instead of just singling out members,” she said.