



Editorial: Crist saves road jobs with budget gamble

The Tampa Tribune

Published: June 2, 2010

Taking a calculated risk that Florida's economy will be stronger in years ahead, Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed the Legislature's ill-advised hijacking of transportation funds.

The move will save construction jobs and probably keep some construction companies out of bankruptcy, at a time of unprecedented hardship for the building industry.

He also vetoed the USF pharmacy school in Lakeland and several other worthy education projects, but their delay is acceptable. When revenue is as short as it is this year, some sacrifices are unavoidable.

Delaying the pharmacy school will give the Legislature time to reconsider putting it where it belongs and where it was originally intended, near the USF medical school in Tampa.

A bigger problem was the Legislature's plan to spend \$160 million in fuel taxes on public schools instead of roads. The switch would have allowed for a small increase this year in per-pupil spending, but according to the Florida Transportation Builders Association, the diversion would have caused \$400 million in transportation projects to be delayed or canceled.

And Crist also was right to veto an unprecedented legislative attempt to force the Tampa-Hillsborough Expressway Authority to immediately repay \$19 million of a long-term obligation to the State Department of Transportation.

The loss of the money would have delayed a planned widening of the toll road in Tampa and possibly hurt the agency's bond rating.

From a larger perspective, it would have threatened all local toll agencies with legislative raids on their reserve funds. It would have added a new layer of politics to the straightforward concept of charging local users for improvements in local expressways.

As for the larger raid on the transportation trust fund, even if the entire \$160 million had to be subtracted from school expenses, the per-pupil reduction would be less than 1 percent, an acceptable cut in these challenging times.

But Crist refused to veto the level of school spending set by lawmakers, so the money appears to be coming out of reserves.

And that has its own costs. House Speaker Larry Cretul said additional withdrawals of reserves could lower the state's bond ratings. The Ocala Republican has a point, but so does Crist.

Postponing needed construction projects is no way to stimulate the economy or prepare for future growth. Crist is gambling that growth will return before the reserves are needed.

Even in the tight budget year, key lawmakers found lots of money for their pet projects. Crist pointed out that instead of tightening their belts, "they just spent like crazy. It's incredible."

He has vetoed some \$371 million from the state budget, which really isn't very much, only about one half of one percent of total spending. And it's actually less than that in total savings, because he also restored \$216 million to Medicaid.

The best thing that can be said about this year's \$70.4 billion budget is that it had less fat than usual, but it did have projects that were safe to delay, including the pharmacy school.

Many of the vetoed projects are in Miami-Dade County, which raises the question of why so much money was going to the home county of the House budget chairman, David Rivera, a Miami Republican.

The best of these vetoed projects, including the pharmacy school, will come back to life next year. But the bad pets won't return, which will be a good deal for taxpayers.