



DAILY BRIEF

From January 7, 2009

Budget slashing continued in Tallahassee today as legislators passed a majority of the appropriations bills in preparation for floor sessions Thursday and Friday. On Friday, both chambers will be in session as final votes on the new budget are anticipated. Legislators will be busy this weekend holding conference committee meetings, which are composed of members from each chamber and tasked with finding common ground between each chamber's proposed budgets.

Several major announcements on the budget were made today. For starters, the House is considering a proposal to take another \$600 million from the budget stabilization fund, leaving a balance of only \$72 million in the state's savings account. Additionally, the House is proposing to raid \$400 million from the Lawton Chiles Fund to help plug budget holes and borrow another \$600 million from the fund to replenish the budget stabilization fund.

In addition, the latest popular program to take a hit is Florida Forever – the state's land buying program that is a model across the country. Last session, legislators passed a historic extension of this program that would provide increased bonding capacities for the purchase of state lands for conservation. AIF was a big supporter of this program and lobbied extensively for passage of the extension of Florida Forever. The move, proposed by the Senate, will save the state about \$20 million dollars.

In addition, transportation advocates including AIF are sounding the alarm regarding additional raids to the state transportation trust fund. The House is proposing another \$200 million sweep of this fund, thus further reducing the ability of the Department of Transportation to fund transportation projects. This is counterintuitive to what AIF and a number of business organizations are proposing in the ***Economic Stimulus Package (ESP) 2.0***. Funding of transportation projects is the quickest way to stimulate Florida's lagging economy.

We urge all AIF members to contact their elected officials and voice their opposition to sweeping additional transportation dollars.

COURT FUNDING

The proposal to increase fees and fines as a method to help fund Florida's court system continues to make progress in both the House and Senate. The House Full Appropriations Council on General Government and Healthcare passed HB 5107A during their meeting this afternoon. This proposal would generate an estimated \$15.9 million in the remainder of fiscal year 2008-09 and \$63.2 million in fiscal year 2009-10, in order to offset general revenue reductions proposed for the State Courts System. The State Court System has recently been hit with staggering reductions in appropriations and has experienced exceedingly heavy case loads across the state, reducing the number of cases that can be heard and forcing the elimination of Traffic Hearing Officers. A number of members of the minority party expressed concern with raising court fees and traffic fines during debate on the bill and ultimately voted against the bill. Earlier in the day, the Senate Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations Committee passed their version of this proposal, SB 12A by Senator Victor Crist (R-Tampa).

AIF strongly encourages the Florida Legislature to fund the court system adequately and swiftly at a level equivalent to the judiciary's status as the third equal branch. A new mechanism for proper judicial funding, such as a dedicated trust fund for court fees must be established to ensure that the legal needs of Florida's citizens and businesses (involved in over 4 million cases each year) are met in an efficient and just manner.