

10 major issues facing Florida's Legislature

March 1, 2015

BUDGET

With more than a \$1 billion surplus, the 2015-16 state budget should present fewer obstacles to lawmakers. Yet how the money is spent will be sharply debated. Gov. Rick Scott has already made a large claim by pushing \$673 million in tax cuts and calling for record spending on public schools in his \$77 billion budget plan. Lawmakers will cut taxes and increase education funding – but the level is yet to be determined. ***Putting more pressure on the budget is a new constitutional amendment that will require the Legislature to spend \$757 million on environmental programs. Lawmakers must do that without impacting other programs, such as affordable housing, that have previously counted on that funding.*** There is also uncertainty over the future of a \$2.2 billion federal program that reimburses Florida hospitals that have large caseloads of poor and uninsured patients.

TAX CUTS

Scott has put a \$673 million tax-cutting plan on the table. Lawmakers will likely go along with much of it, although they may differ on the type of tax cuts and the amount. Lawmakers are interested in Scott's plan to cut the tax that Floridians pay on their cellphone and cable television bills. It's the biggest cut in Scott's package at \$471 million, although it only amounts to a \$43 annual reduction for every \$100 a month that Floridians spend on communications services. Scott also wants to let college students buy their textbooks tax free and he wants to permanently eliminate the state tax on manufacturing equipment. Another back-to-school sales tax holiday will be in the mix.

HEALTH CARE

Hospitals and business lobbying groups will lead a renewed push for expansion of Medicaid under the federal Affordable Care Act. They are motivated by the possibility that major employers who do not offer health care coverage could face fines under the ACA. Hospitals are worried about the potential demise of the \$2.2 billion "low income pool (LIP)" that reimburses hospitals for the care of uninsured patients. The expansion proposals would offer a modified version of the standard Medicaid program and include provisions such as having the patients pay a premium and require participation in work and education programs. The Senate remains willing to consider a Medicaid plan, while the stumbling block is the House, where leaders remain firmly opposed.

TESTING

Everyone agrees that Florida public school students face too much testing. It will be up to lawmakers to decide how far those tests, which include the new Florida State Assessments (FSA), will be pared back. Gov. Scott has outlined an initial move, including the elimination of an 11th-grade language arts tests that teachers and administrators say is redundant. But there could be other moves, including limiting the time that students spend on testing and reducing the way the tests are used to evaluate teacher performance. School superintendents, school boards and teachers are calling for a "pause" on using the new FSA, which replaces the FCAT this year, to evaluate teachers and schools. But legislative leaders seem reluctant to make a major shift in what they see as a critical "accountability" system.

ENVIRONMENT

This will be one of the dominant issues of the 2015 session. Lawmakers are moving forward with a major water policy for the state. There are differences in the approaches but key elements include springs protection, dealing with water discharges in the Lake Okeechobee region and continuing efforts to restore the Everglades. Added into the mix is the new Amendment 1, approved by 75 percent of the voters, that requires one-third of the state's real estate tax to be used for environmental programs. A debate has already ensued over whether the Amendment 1 money should go for land conservation and the protection of water sources or whether it can be used for projects like sewage treatment or stormwater systems.

GUNS

Lawmakers are moving bills that would allow college and university students to carry guns on their campuses if they have a concealed-weapons permit from the state. Proponents, including Rep. Greg Steube, R-Sarasota, say allowing the guns to be carried by students who must be at least 21 years old and pass a firearms safety course will improve campus security. But the measure is opposed by many professors and university administrators. Another Steube bill (HB 19) would let designated public school officials carry a concealed weapon in kindergartens through high schools subject to approval by the local school superintendent and local school boards.

BEER

The clash between the growing craft brewing industry and the established liquor distributors and retailers will continue. At the very least, the craft brewers want the ability to sell 64-ounce containers, called "growlers," at their establishments. On a broader level, the craft brewers want confirmation and the expansion of their ability to directly sell their IPA beers and stouts to consumers. The retailers and distributors want to protect their system that requires most alcoholic products to be moved through an established distributor. An added fight in the liquor legislation has Publix and ABC Fine Wine & Spirits opposing a move by Walmart and other national chains to allow hard liquor sales in their grocery stores.

GAMBLING

This issue will hinge on the soon-to-expire gambling agreement with the Seminole Tribe. If Gov. Scott can craft a new agreement with the tribe, it will move to the Legislature for approval. The current agreement brings more than \$100 million to the state each year but will end in July. A new gambling deal will likely bring a call from other gaming interests to consider issues such as helping the existing horse and dog tracks in the state and allowing Las Vegas-style casinos for the first time in Florida.

DISABLED FLORIDIANS

This issue has long been a priority for Senate President Andy Gardiner, whose son has Down syndrome. House Speaker Steve Crisafulli is also in full support of an initiative to help Floridians "with unique abilities." The proposal is aimed at improving education and work opportunities for disabled residents. It would expand on legislation passed last year that allowed disabled students to use "personal savings accounts" to direct their education and training. It will also expand opportunities for post-high school education and training and would provide incentives for Florida businesses to hire workers with disabilities.

GUARDIANSHIPS

Legislation is moving that is aimed at curbing abuses in Florida's adult guardianship system by providing new protections for Floridians who end up under a guardian's supervision because of illness or mental

incapacitation. Advocates are calling for more oversight and transparency in the process for families whose members end up in guardianships.

— Lloyd Dunkelberger