

## Florida budget is getting bipartisan support

By **Zac Anderson**

**Political Editor**



Posted Mar 9, 2018 at 6:14 PM

Updated Mar 9, 2018 at 6:14 PM

There was broad, bipartisan support Friday for the election-year spending plan produced by state lawmakers.

The Florida Legislature debated the proposed 2018-19 budget in advance of a Sunday vote.

Democrats raised a handful of complaints, but also offered plenty of praise for an \$88.7 billion budget that has funding increases in many areas.

Republicans — who control the Legislature and the budget process — talked up increases in spending on K-12 education, universities, land conservation and a host of other programs.

Sen. Rob Bradley, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the budget is “one we can go home and talk to our fellow Floridians about with pride.”

Bradley highlighted the fact that lawmakers are dedicating \$101 million for the Florida Forever land buying program while also boosting spending on school safety and Bright Futures college scholarships.

***Democrats criticized the \$182 million lawmakers are sweeping out of a trust fund that is dedicated to help pay for affordable housing projects. The money will be used to fund other budget priorities.***

***“I think most of us here live in a community that has a real problem with affordable housing,” said Rep. Evan Jenne, a Dania Beach Democrat. “I know I do.”***

***Rep. Ben Diamond, D-St. Petersburg, said the trust fund sweep is “making a bad problem worse.”***

Democrats also questioned whether the amount of money being set aside for K-12 education is sufficient. The budget increases per-pupil education spending by \$101 — or \$485 million overall — but some wanted to see the state go further.

Gov. Rick Scott requested twice as much per-pupil spending.

Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando, noted that GOP leaders are advancing tens of millions in tax cuts this year, money that could be used to fund other priorities.

“There are areas of the budget that are underfunded; why aren’t we forgoing the tax cuts?” he asked Friday.

But many Democrats seemed prepared to vote for the budget. Diamond said he is particularly happy about the money for Florida Forever.

“I think that’s a significant, positive thing,” he said.

The Senate also prioritized higher-education spending as part of a multi-year effort to enhance the quality and stature of the state’s universities.

The funding is boosting university budgets across Florida, from large institutions such as the University of Florida to the smallest one, New College of Florida in Sarasota.

With the 2018 election approaching, lawmakers seemed inclined to avoid controversy over the budget this year.

House leaders were eager to scrutinize spending in a variety of areas last year, leading to some big fights, especially over the issue of taxpayer-funded business incentives. But there was little of that this year.

The budget process wasn’t without drama. A standoff over health care spending forced the Legislature to go beyond Friday - the regularly scheduled end to the 60-day session – and pass the budget Sunday.

Senate leaders wanted to boost Medicaid payments to nursing homes and change how Medicaid money is distributed to hospitals. Nursing homes eventually received an additional \$130 million and the Senate backed off the proposal to overhaul hospital payments, which would have resulted in big cuts at some hospitals, including UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville and UF Health Jacksonville.

The health care deal paved the way for the budget process to wrap up with relatively little controversy.

“This budget is a very good budget,” said Rep. Joseph Abruzzo, a Boyton Beach Democrat. “It is record level funding in many different areas.”