

Parkland shooting response siphons state funding from tax cuts, housing



Old Florida Capitol building (Richard Tribou)



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TALLAHASSEE — Florida lawmakers writing the state budget wanted at least \$180 million in tax cuts and plenty of funding for affordable housing and the opioid crisis.

Then a gunman walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland on Feb. 14 and killed 17 people, upending those plans.

“The tragedy in Parkland changed everything,” said [Senate](#) budget chief Rob Bradley, R-Fleming Island. “The safety of the children comes first.”

[GOP](#) leaders in both chambers are advancing bills with \$390 million in spending in response to the shooting — the money going toward school resource officers, child welfare case managers, mental health programs in schools, “hardening” schools and firearms training for teachers who volunteer to carry weapons in schools.

To find the money, lawmakers are reducing the amount set aside for reserves, forgoing \$100 million in tax cuts and sweeping money from an affordable housing trust fund.

Democrats agree the spending is necessary but object to diverting funds from affordable housing, which are generated by a tax on real estate transactions.

“It’s because of Parkland, and I certainly understand the needs there,” said House Democratic Leader Janet Cruz, of Tampa. “But I feel like we are committing fraud when ... we add a [real estate tax] and then turn around and use it for something else.”

And with the influx of Puerto Ricans moving to Florida after Hurricane Maria, affordable housing needs have ballooned. But as the House and Senate enter budget negotiations, the latest House offer puts \$110 million toward affordable housing, nearly \$200 million less than the Senate planned to spend before the Parkland shooting.

“Because of Parkland we swept a lot of trust funds,” Bradley said. “Affordable housing — there just isn’t enough money there to maintain the Senate’s position of not sweeping that fund.”

In the years since the Great Recession, as the state’s economy has rebounded, Republicans have preferred to use surpluses to cut taxes rather than spend on social programs. Gov. Rick Scott says he’s cut more than \$7.5 billion since taking office in 2011, and Republicans say that’s part of the reason for the economic rebound.

Florida, though, remains near the bottom of states in spending per capita on mental health. And some Republican lawmakers have admitted the \$53 million in funding still in the budget for opioid addiction treatment and prevention isn’t enough to address the problem seriously.

The \$64.5 million lawmakers initially put toward its “safe schools” program, which pays for school resource officers, has stayed flat for nearly a decade and remains below pre-recession

levels. In many districts, sheriff's departments must supplement funding to pay for resource officers.

The bills pushed by lawmakers in response to the Parkland shooting would add \$75 million to that amount, adding 1,000 resource officers to schools across the state.

Scott, touring the state this week highlighting his package of school safety reforms, has said he was willing to give up his proposed \$180 million tax cut to help pay for it.

“That proves my point,” said Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, D-Orlando. “When there’s the political will to invest in programs that we believe in that have been historically underfunded, there’s a way to do it.”

Lawmakers, though, still found room for \$80 million in tax cuts, although which taxes will be reduced is still to be decided.

The Legislature’s school plan also includes \$100 million for mental health programs in schools; \$67.5 million for firearms training for teachers; \$90.7 million for school “hardening” projects like metal detectors, bullet-resistant windows and improved locks; \$34.4 million for child welfare case managers and crisis teams; and \$5 million for a threat monitoring system for schools.

House and Senate negotiators are in the final stages of budget talks. They have until Tuesday to reach a final agreement to meet the 72-hour “cooling off” period mandated by the constitution ahead of a vote March 9, the scheduled final day of the legislative session.

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