

Extra money? What are state's priorities?

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Talk about a Christmas present!

How would you like to be Governor-elect Ron DeSantis and learn the state will likely have a tax windfall of an extra \$365 million to spend your first year in office?

That happened recently when it was announced that state revenue collections during the fiscal year that began July 1 are running about \$365.1 million ahead of projections. Sales tax collections are \$173.5 million ahead and corporate income tax is running about \$126 million more than expected.

So, when lawmakers return to Tallahassee in January, they will have a chunk of extra money to spend.

How they spend it is the big question. We think we can help.

There are three critical funds that could use some cash — two that provide help to low-income Floridians and a third that lawmakers have been financially choking for years. Here are three great ideas how to spend at least part of that unexpected tax income:

Children's health care

The state Agency for Health Care Administration is asking for \$16.3 million to provide 22,000 children in the Florida Healthy Kids program with health insurance.

Florida could use the money to take advantage of a change in federal regulations that would lower premiums to \$170 a month for full-pay children and add more children to the program.

A Georgetown University Center study recently showed there are about 325,000 uninsured children in Florida as of 2017, up from 288,000 in 2016. These kids either go without medical treatment or go to hospital emergency rooms and run up bills their families cannot pay.

House Speaker Jose Oliva, however, says the money taxpayers put out for health care now means we should be lowering costs, not spending more, according to the News Service of Florida.

Well, Jose, now you've got another \$365 million to work with.

The Sadowski Fund

About two decades ago, the Florida Legislature established the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund. It takes revenue generated by taxes on documents such as real estate titles and uses it to help provide affordable housing. No one should dispute the need for affordable housing — especially in Southwest Florida.

Last year, doc stamps generated about \$292 million for the Sadowski fund. But the Legislature dipped stuck its hand in the cookie jar and took out \$130 million to balance the general budget. Lawmakers have done that for 15 straight years. It's time to stop, and this year's windfall of cash should provide a reason to quit stealing that money.

Florida Forever

Last year, for the first time in a long time, the Florida Legislature dropped \$101 million into the Florida Forever Fund, a savings account to buy environmentally sensitive land in the state for preservation.

From 1990 until 2008 the state put aside about \$275 million a year for the Florida Forever program. Since then, until this year, the funding dried up.

As the price of land swells, Florida needs about \$14 billion to purchase all the land — including parcels in Sarasota and Charlotte counties — on the program's priority list. The \$101 million put into the fund this past year, while a nice gesture, is only a drop in the bucket and much less than lawmakers should be making.

Highlands News-Sun

We believe these are not only three worthy programs for all that extra tax money, but programs legislators are required to fund.

An editorial from the Charlotte Sun.

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