

Originally appeared on News-Journal Online

March 3, 2009

Crist: 'Our people are struggling'

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TALLAHASSEE — Saying "people are counting on us," Gov. Charlie Crist started the 2009 legislative session Tuesday by calling on lawmakers to use billions of dollars in federal money to help solve Florida's massive budget problems.

Crist, in his annual State of the State address, urged Republicans and Democrats to work together as they deal with a reeling economy that has caused unemployment and housing foreclosures to soar, businesses to close and tax collections to plummet.

"Our people are struggling, as a state and as a nation," Crist said during the address to representatives and senators packed into the House chambers. "And like never before, we have seen that we have an obligation to serve them and serve them well."

But Crist's call for using \$4.7 billion in federal stimulus money to plug budget holes could run into opposition in the Legislature.

Just hours before the governor's speech, Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, warned against relying too heavily on such stop-gap funding to balance the budget. The money, which comes from a recently approved federal stimulus package, will run out in two years.

Atwater said plugging in the federal money without making spending cuts or increasing tax revenues "will leave us with a bigger budget gap three years from now than the one we face today."

But lawmakers face pressure to avoid major budget cuts, particularly in funding for public schools. Crist would use part of the federal money to help increase school funding — a point he hammered home Tuesday by saying "Florida's children certainly deserve it."

"The governor is on point in using the stimulus dollars," said Sen. Tony Hill, a Jacksonville Democrat whose district includes parts of Volusia and Flagler counties. "People are hurting in Florida."

Crist's speech capped the first day of the legislative session, which is ordinarily a festive time in Tallahassee. The Capitol included some of the usual trappings of opening day, with spouses and children joining lawmakers in the flower-filled House and Senate chambers.

Also, the session started with the House formally electing Rep. Larry Cretul, R-Ocala, to serve as speaker. Cretul replaced Rep. Ray Sansom, R-Destin, who stepped aside last month because of an investigation into his dealings with a Panhandle college.

But Crist and lawmakers couldn't escape the budget and economic problems that will hover over the 60-day session.

That was apparent during a lunchtime rally outside the Capitol, when college students and faculty railed against budget cuts, chanting, "No more cuts, no more cuts, no more cuts."

Lawmakers face a potential \$700 million deficit during the current fiscal year and as much as a \$6 billion shortfall during the year that starts July 1.

But Crist, who is known for his optimism, repeatedly cast the challenges facing lawmakers as an "opportunity." He also tried to deflect criticism from some state and national Republicans about using the federal stimulus money, which Democratic President Barack Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress approved.

"My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs — the needs of our students and our teachers, the sick and the infirm or those out of work altogether," the GOP governor said.

House Democrats praised Crist for his willingness to use the stimulus money to avoid budget cuts.

"The governor is making sure we're putting everything on the table and looking at every available thing," said Rep. Dwayne Taylor, D-Daytona Beach.

But Rep. Pat Patterson, R-DeLand, described the use of the federal money as "delicate balancing." To even go along with Crist, lawmakers would have to override legal limits that are designed to prevent the state from relying too heavily on one-time infusions of money.

"Some of our holes can't be plugged with stimulus money," Patterson said.

But a key issue in making the decisions will be paying for public schools.

"Funding education will eclipse every other issue by far," said Sen. Carey Baker, a Eustis Republican whose district includes part of western Volusia County.

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