



Senate Budget Panel Questions Whether Crist Budget Plan is Feasible

by Kathleen Haughney

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The polite response to Gov. Charlie Crist's State of the State address seemed to evaporate Thursday as members of senate's budget panel began firing questions at the governor's budget director about Crist's seemingly too-sunny budget.

The governor rolled out a budget nearly two weeks ago that relies heavily on federal stimulus funds. Not only did Crist avoid suggesting tax increases, he actually proposed reducing some property taxes.

He also said he could up the amount of dollars that would go to public schools throughout the state.

But some of the details on the federal stimulus package are still being worked out. It remains unclear whether Florida will receive part of the stimulus package reserved for school funding. A provision of the law requires Florida to fund schools at the same level it did in 2005-2006, something it does not do. Crist budget director Jerry McDaniel said he is confident that the state will receive a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education and receive the money, but added he cannot say that with 100 percent certainty.

Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, said the governor's budget was based on assumptions, not reality. Stimulus funds may not even completely cover the shortfall for next year. The state will see the latest revenue projections next Friday, so the governor's budget is an estimate at best.

And, his proposal may also have to be revamped if the revenue projections reveal that there is a shortfall on the current year's budget.

“Will the governor come back to us in a few days or a week or two?” Gaetz asked McDaniel at the Senate Ways and Means Committee Thursday.

McDaniel said he would have a conversation with the governor about what he would like to do if there is a shortfall for the current year.

Sen. Stephen Wise, R- Jacksonville, criticized Crist for not including enough money for class size reduction and for relying on federal stimulus money to pay for recurring expenses. He said that use of money would create a “mess” three years down the line when it is no longer available to pay for critical expenditures.

“It becomes almost insurmountable, the position that you would put us in,” Wise said.

McDaniel said that the state could choose not to use the money – but the state can't do anything about the fact it's a one-time pot of money. If the state had more one-time expenses, it could spend the money there, but many of its needs are ongoing.

“It's non-recurring money and we can't change that fact and we probably don't' have enough nonrecurring places to put this,” he said.

Senate Budget Chief JD Alexander, R-Winter Haven, said after the Ways and Means meeting that lawmakers aspired to accomplish some of the ideas that the governor laid out in his budget proposal, but that they faced a harsher reality, something he is not sure the public



understands.

“I think all of us are concerned that the public has the perception with the stimulus dollars that we don't still have a deficit,” Alexander said.

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