



**Commentary
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Florida Governor Charlie Crist has proposed a state budget that relies on federal stimulus and other non-recurring monies as well as a still-to-be approved casino agreement with the Seminole Tribe for revenue. Quite likely, the budget that the Florida legislature eventually passes will differ from what the governor has put forward. Differences between what has been proposed and what will be appropriated will almost certainly affect Seminole County. Here are just three examples.

First, the county's children and their parents had better hope that the governor's gambling deal with the tribe is approved and produces some badly needed cash. In lieu of that, education funding will, at best, remain at the level it was at in 2008-2009. Additionally, the governor's budget assumes postponement of the final phase of a voter-mandated class size cap. Here, the legislature will likely follow his lead; but by doing so, lawmakers will continue to leave Florida with more students in school classrooms than its southern state neighbors. While class size is no panacea for low school performance, evidence indicates that smaller numbers positively impact the learning disabled, students for whom English is a second language, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and underachieving students generally. Difficult times should not be a rationale for diminishing a program that is working for those who benefit from it the most.

Secondly, Housing affordability in Seminole County -- measured in terms of how many households can afford the median home based on income price -- fell significantly during the housing bubble of the last decade. Despite this, Governor Crist proposes to further raid the state's affordable housing trust fund, 80% of which the Republican majority diverted to general revenue last year. The trust's money used for its stated purpose generates economic activity, creates jobs, and helps with economic recovery. Difficult times should not be a rationale for ignoring the housing needs of those who depend most on assistance.

Lastly, the state legislature will be making a cynical statement about Seminole County's promotion of itself as "Florida's Natural Choice" if it fails to restore full funding for the Florida Forever conservation trust fund. The Republican majority appropriated no money for the current year, and despite the governor's support of new funds, the House Natural Resources Appropriations panel has not made the program a priority for this legislative session. Seminole County's lakes and rivers, its water resources, and its wildlife habitats are both environmental and economic assets. Difficult times should not be a rationale for mortgaging the future.

Because people and nature matter, this is Michael Hoover.