Florida lawmakers agree to cut pay of some state workers

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TALLAHASSEE — Thousands of state workers will get a small pay cut, school taxes could rise by $380 million statewide and the Florida Forever environmental land-buying program was spared after legislators Sunday cleared up some final roadblocks to balance Florida's budget.

The budget chiefs from the House and Senate also agreed to spare libraries from deep cuts, limit advertising for a crisis pregnancy hotline and eliminate a provision to ban state money from being used in embryonic-stem cell research. Remaining to be resolved before the proposed $65 billion budget for the next fiscal year is printed: whether to spend or save $246 million in surplus Medicaid money for charity care.

Lawmakers this week also will start reconciling differences over the expansion of casino gambling, an issue that could net the state $500 million and provide Gov. Charlie Crist with a political win.

Crist, who has struggled with the Legislature over the issue, suggested a veto might be in the offing if lawmakers fail to ink an acceptable deal with the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

"If it doesn't happen, you know, I may have to cut things out of this budget that are put in there. And the members are, I think, acutely cognizant of that," Crist said.

Is that a threat?

"Oh, no. Not at all," Crist told reporters. "Please don't characterize it that way. It's not. It's just reality."

Crist praised the effort to spare the land conservation program, Florida Forever, on Sunday. Under an agreement struck late in the day, lawmakers helped improve the credit-worthiness of the bonds the program uses for land buying. That should allow for the sale of up to $250 million in bonds that the state hasn't been able to sell this year.

"Florida Forever is still alive," said Eric Draper, a spokesman and lobbyist for Audubon of Florida.

Florida Forever won't get any new money, but another environmental land-buying program, Save Our Everglades, was boosted by $50 million.

Legislators failed to come to agreement over the budget by the scheduled end of the 60-day lawmaking session Friday, so they extended the session for another week.

The first major agreement: letting school boards, by a supermajority vote, raise property taxes for schools. Voters
would have to approve the measure in 2010. Senate budget chief J.D. Alexander and his House counterparts also reached accord over state employee pay cuts. They agreed to trim the salaries of the roughly 25,000 state workers who earn $45,000 or more by 2 percent.

The House initially wanted bigger cuts. The Senate wanted smaller ones.

Legislators also reduced their own $30,000 salaries by about 6 percent. But they spared colleges and universities from pay cuts so that the institutions can continue to attract skilled staff.

Miami Republican Rep. David Rivera, a House budget chief, agreed to drop budget language that would prohibit state higher-education institutions from spending taxpayer money on embryonic stem cell research and travel to states designated as sponsors of terror — namely, Cuba.

In return, the Senate agreed to fully fund a Florida International University medical school by kicking in an additional $11 million. Rivera, though, said it wasn't a trade.

"I would never use that term, that it was a trade," Rivera said. "I would say we came to a compromise."

Alexander backed off a plan to privatize a prison in Live Oak.

And Alexander and his counterparts refused to add more money in the budget for Tri-Rail, though South Florida senators had requested the funding.

Many of the South Florida senators wanted the funding to come from money set aside for a Central Florida commuter rail line that they had successfully blocked Friday. That bill also had a Tri-Rail funding source.

Alexander said he didn't feel inclined to help them.

"Given the lack of support for Central Florida's rail project," Alexander said, "it's kind of hard to get excited about supporting South Florida's rail project."

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