

## 2012 Session Outlook: Transportation

Gray Rohrer, 12/30/2011 - 11:24 PM

**Gov. Rick Scott** highlighted Florida's transportation system this summer as a key factor in jumpstarting the state economy. He's called for fully integrating the state's ports, airports, highways and rails, and for more money to dredge the **Port of Miami** and possibly other ports in order to establish Florida as a regional trading hub. Financing such a vision for the debt-averse governor will be a challenge considering that projections foresee dwindling fuel taxes in coming years. Scott has advocated more tolls on new roads and expansions, and more public-private partnerships as the new way to fund road projects.

The budget pain for transportation has already been foretold: Scott's budget recommendations called for a \$1.2 billion reduction in transportation spending. The cuts could further delay projects already behind schedule. In Central Florida, for example, some projects are set for delays as money is funneled to the Wekiva Parkway, with the final details being hammered out between the **Florida Department of Transportation** and local agencies.

Aside from the budget battle, the Legislature could address a series of traffic rules in this year's session. The Senate put the brakes on the red light camera repeal that narrowly passed the House in 2011, but now a spate of bills aim to repeal the cameras or make universal the amount of time yellow caution lights last between green and red. There are a number of bills aimed at banning texting while driving and tea party groups are getting behind a pair of bills that would eliminate federal **REAL ID Act of 2005** requirements for drivers' licenses.

There was discussion in the fall about consolidating Florida's seven expressway authorities, but the **Government Efficiency Task Force** came back with a suggestion to merge just the toll collection functions of the authorities into the **Florida Turnpike Enterprise**. That idea, however, is likely dead for the upcoming session, because lawmakers in Tampa and Orlando – which both have large expressway authorities – are not inclined to give up their autonomy on tolls. Other task force ideas such as cutting or limiting the compensation for expressway authority directors and staff, however, are less controversial.

Here's the breakdown of the prevailing transportation issues:

### **BUDGET**

**Description:** With Florida facing a \$2 billion shortfall, all areas of the budget will be scrapping for every dollar. Scott has prioritized education for spending, and targeted health care for cuts, but state transportation needs are also asked to do with \$1.2 billion less in the 2012-2013 fiscal year than in the current year.

**Outlook:** Transportation will be fighting with other areas of the budget for funding, **House Speaker Dean Cannon** as much said in a pre-session interview. The Winter Park Republican added, though, that he wasn't overly concerned about transportation cuts that could affect road projects in his Central Florida area ... as long as the **Wekiva Parkway** goes ahead as planned.

“Yes, [potential transportation cuts] concern me, but again, in the same way that the general economic recession concerns me. Wekiva's a priority of Central Florida and of mine.

Transportation is in the same boat as education, health care, public safety -- that we've got declining revenues with a fixed and sometimes increasing cost burden. And it's about making choices. You have to set your priorities," Cannon said.

## **RULES OF THE ROAD**

**Description:** Lawmakers are vacillating over what to do with red light cameras in the state, as evidenced by the near-repeal of the cameras one year after passing a law allowing them. Now lawmakers are considering bills to make all yellow light durations uniform across the state based on the posted speed limit at an intersection. And if you want to get in a quick text at a long red light, that will earn you a ticket under a series of bills filed this year. Privacy concerns have also led **The Tea Party Network**, a collection of tea party groups from across the state, to support bills eliminating federal REAL ID requirements to show two primary forms of identification (such as a Social Security number and a passport) in order to get a driver's license.

**Outlook:** In a session with a lot of distractions, lawmakers will be hard-pressed to make up their minds on an issue they've gone back and forth on in recent years. Uniform yellow lights, as proposed in **HB 33** and **SB 590**, however, may seem an appealing compromise position in a tough budget and redistricting session. Lawmakers are spoiled for choice in selecting from texting bans, from **Sen. Nancy Detert's SB 416**, which bans texts for all drivers, to other bills (**HB 187, HB 1135, SB 930**), which would ban texting for drivers under the age of 18. Although The Tea Party Network, which has about 70 member organizations in Florida, announced it was installing a "headquarters" in the Capitol in October, tea party members have not been as visible or vocal in subsequent committee weeks. **Sen. Greg Evers** requested the space in the Capitol on their behalf to rally support for his **SB 220** to repeal REAL ID requirements.

## **EXPRESSWAY AUTHORITIES**

**Description:** The **Government Efficiency Task Force** recommended consolidating all the expressway authority toll collection duties under the banner of the Florida Turnpike Enterprise, with estimated savings of \$22 million. It also suggested a study of full consolidation, bringing the **Mid Bay Bridge Authority** under the FTE and limiting compensation for board members and directors of the authorities.

**Outlook:** An entrenched turf war over the toll collecting autonomy of the expressway authorities is the last thing lawmakers need when attempting to maneuver through the politically delicate redistricting process and another tight budget. **Don Gaetz**, the next Senate president, is keen on the idea, however, so don't expect the expressway authority consolidation idea to fade away completely. Instead of merging the authorities this year, legislators could be making another one. The **Seminole County Expressway Authority** was one of several authorities that were thought to be defunct and eliminated in 2011. But the SCEA, which met only twice annually in recent years, will be affected by the Wekiva Parkway, part of which will run through the county. Local legislators **Rep. Scott Plakon** and **Sen. David Simmons** have bills (**HB 219** and **SB 354**) to bring it back.

Key players:

**Sen. Don Gaetz**, R-Niceville, the former chairman of the **Senate Budget Subcommittee on Transportation, Tourism and Economic Development Appropriations** still holds outsized influence as a member of the committee – he also chairs the **Senate Reapportionment Committee** and is next in line to be Senate president.

**Sen. Jack Latvala**, R-St. Petersburg, chairs the **Senate Transportation Committee**.

**Rep. Mike Horner**, R-Kissimmee, chairs the **House Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Subcommittee** and also sits on the **House Transportation and Highway Safety Subcommittee** and **House Appropriations Committee**.

**Gov. Rick Scott**, pushing for greater transportation integration to boost Florida's trade status and wants to move to more tolls to fund road projects.

**Rep. Brad Drake**, R-Eucheeanna, chairs the House Transportation and Highway Safety Subcommittee and is a member of the House Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Subcommittee.

Key Committees:

**House Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations Subcommittee**

**House Transportation and Highway Safety Subcommittee**

**Senate Transportation Subcommittee**

**Senate Budget Subcommittee on Transportation Tourism and Economic Development Appropriations**

**House Appropriations Committee**

**Senate Budget Committee**

*Reporter Gray Rohrer can be reached at [grohrer@thefloridacurrent.com](mailto:grohrer@thefloridacurrent.com).*