

## Steve Bousquet column: Rick Scott, Charlie Crist ready to rumble



Steve Bousquet, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

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Gentlemen, start your engines.

Gov. Rick Scott is taking a celebratory victory lap around Florida this week, taking credit for a \$25 cut in auto tag fees that legislators approved and he signed into law, all the while hammering the record of Charlie Crist, his likely Democratic rival.

On Monday, Scott launched his "Help Is on the Way" tour at a Volkswagen dealership near Jacksonville. Today, Scott will make a stop at Brandon Honda.

It's hard to think of a more appropriate place for Scott to make his re-election pitch than a car lot. It's the home of the hard sell, where salesmen have been known to skip over what's in the fine print.

For starters, Scott and the Legislature did not "cut taxes" as he claims. They cut the cost of annual fees that went way up under then-Republican Gov. Crist and the GOP-dominated Legislature in 2009. When it suits them, politicians make distinctions between taxes and fees, or lump them together.

And when Scott calls it "Charlie Crist's vehicle registration tax," he ignores the fact that the idea came from the Legislature and that most Republican lawmakers voted for the increases, including Scott's lieutenant governor, Carlos Lopez-Cantera, who was in the House in 2009.

Crist was on the trail Monday, too, and also not telling the whole truth as he feasted on what he called Scott's failings at Versailles, a popular Cuban restaurant in Miami.

"Rick Scott is trying to boast that he increased education funding. Well, he did it by raising property taxes about \$400 million," Crist told supporters.

No. Scott did not raise property taxes. Not exactly.

The "record" education budget Scott will brag about from now until Election Day is in fact the highest in total dollars for public schools, but it's not the highest spending per student ever. That happened under Crist in 2007-08, right before the economy crashed.

Nearly half of the money to run schools next year, \$7.2 billion, will come from local property taxes in each of the 67 counties. The rest comes from state taxes that everybody pays.

It has been that way in Florida for a very long time.

Buried deep in the fine print of the state budget is the local property tax burden, called required local effort, or RLE. It's a line on your annual property tax bill.

Scott and the Legislature simply left the property tax rate the same as it was last year, about 5.2 mills. But because home values are on the increase again, that same rate will produce an additional \$347 million for schools.

And if it's a tax increase, guess what. Most Democrats in the Legislature voted for the budget, so they raised taxes, too.

What Crist also didn't say was that when he was governor, he once signed a budget that raised the property tax rate for schools. He also approved it when it was lowered, too.

Either Scott or Crist is most likely going to lose the governor's race in November. But on the bright side, whoever loses might have a promising future as a used car salesman.

Steve Bousquet can be reached at [bousquet@tampabay.com](mailto:bousquet@tampabay.com) or (850) 224-7263.

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