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## Governor OKs budget

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TALLAHASSEE — Florida Gov. Rick Scott, who came into office promising to tame government spending, signed into law on Monday a record \$77 billion budget for the coming year.

Scott not only approved the new budget, but he also used a light touch on his budget vetoes during his fourth year in office. The nearly \$69 million in line-item vetoes — which included money for a Jacksonville dog park and a Miami observation tower — marked the lowest total during his term.

The Republican governor's handling of the budget was also in contrast to past years. He signed the budget privately with no public fanfare like during his first year when he was surrounded by school children at an event held in an outdoor plaza at a Central Florida retirement community.

Scott's low key handling of the budget comes during a tough re-election campaign where Democrats plan to constantly criticize the governor's record — including his decision in his first year to recommend deep cuts to education.

During a campaign stop in Panama City, Scott said that the low number of vetoes this year was not related to the looming election and that his "focus was on taxpayers."

"Our state has turned around," Scott said. "We have more jobs. We've gotten more people back to working. We've strengthened our investments. We've cut taxes on homeowners so families can get some money back."

Scott also contended that the new budget reached his goals for the year since legislators were able to set aside money for more than \$500 million in tax and fee cuts as part of the spending package approved this year.

Florida's slow but steady economic recovery left state legislators with a budget windfall of roughly \$1.2 billion even after they set aside money for school enrollment and increased costs in Medicaid, the state and federal backed health care program.

The new state budget, which covers spending from July 1 of this year to June 30, 2015, includes increased money for child welfare programs and projects to battle water pollution. The budget also boosted money for colleges and universities, but without raising student tuition rates.

There's an increase for public schools but it's not as large as it was last year. And most of the extra money isn't coming from the state but instead relies on a nearly \$400 million rise in local property taxes.

Andy Ford, the president of Florida's teacher union, criticized Scott and legislators for failing to use the budget surplus to pump up funding for schools to what it was prior to the recession.

“For seven years we’ve been starving our schools despite the growth in the number of students we’re educating,” Ford said. “This budget represents a squandered opportunity for the governor and the Legislature to make a significant investment in Florida’s public school students.”

Republican legislators defended their spending priorities

Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, and the Senate budget chief, said that Scott’s light number of budget vetoes “validates that the Legislature crafted a very prudent and fiscally conservative budget.” He noted that while legislators increased spending they also set aside money for tax and fee cuts and kept \$3 billion in reserves.

But even in a “fiscally conservative” budget there was plenty of spending for hometown projects ranging from everything from gun ranges to a military museum and a course designed to teach “sexual risk avoidance.”

Scott wound up vetoing more than 100 projects, including money to restore county courthouses in north Florida, money for several programs at private Barry University and funding for a South Florida farmers market. He cut funding for an anti-poverty program being pushed by St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman. But he also let through projects that just a year earlier had earned a veto.

The governor did fault legislators for using the budget to try to steer projects to specific vendors. In his veto message, Scott scolded legislators for including language that he charged would “evade” the state’s bidding laws by trying to tailor qualifications to just one company. He said he planned to order agencies to ignore any budget provisions that go against existing bidding laws.

Correspondent Melissa Nelson-Gabriel contributed to this story from Panama City.

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