

# Florida lawmakers enter last stretch of special session with some unresolved issues



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TALLAHASSEE — Florida legislators today begin the final week of their three-week special session that was required because they could not settle differences on health care and pass a budget in the regular session that ended April 30. This is the closest the Legislature has come to ending the fiscal year with no budget since 1992.

Top Senate and House leaders held talks over the weekend. As of late Sunday, here's a status report on eight major issues entering the last week:

**AMENDMENT 1:** House and Senate budget leaders reached agreement late Sunday on how to spend more than \$700 million set aside by voters to buy and preserve land. Included in the budget is \$55 million to buy land. Another \$47.5 million will go to springs restoration and \$81.8 million will be used for Everglades restoration, with most of the money coming from Amendment 1. It's a significant point of agreement within the Legislature, but environmentalists called the numbers "disappointing." **RESOLVED**

**BONDING:** The House could not get the Senate to budge on its refusal to borrow money for college and university construction and water projects, although low interest rates make this a good time to borrow, and capital improvements create a lot of jobs. As a result, scores of campus building and maintenance projects and water proposals will get no money or less than they had hoped for. **RESOLVED.**

**BUDGET:** After more than a week of negotiations between senators and House members that briefly broke down in chaos, the budget is almost done — but not quite. Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, and Crisafulli will spend today in last-minute bargaining to get the budget printed in time for a hoped-for Friday adjournment. **UNRESOLVED.**

**HOSPITALS:** The issue that kept lawmakers tied up in knots for months can be distilled to three letters: LIP, for low-income pool. The \$2 billion program that reimburses hospitals for the costs of treating poor patients will be kept alive for one more year, thanks in part to the Legislature's decision to shore up the pool with \$400 million in money from Florida taxpayers. The money compensates hospitals for patients without family doctors or health insurance who are forced to go to emergency rooms for care. **RESOLVED.**

**JOBS:** Gov. Rick Scott and his job-creation machine, Enterprise Florida, wanted \$85 million to attract business relocations and expansions in Florida. The Legislature agreed to \$35 million. Scott and Enterprise Florida also wanted \$5 million for a new program to market Florida as a destination, and they will get \$1.5 million. **RESOLVED.**

**PROJECTS:** Pork-barrel spending is as old as the Legislature itself, and the budget will likely be stuffed with funding for local projects. Many projects get into the budget each year because of raw political power. The recurring question is why taxpayers all over Florida should pay for something that narrowly benefits one community. Until the budget is done, legislative leaders can — and probably will — add and subtract local projects. UNRESOLVED.

**SCHOOLS:** Florida's 67 county school districts will divide \$19.7 billion next year. That's \$207 more per student, a 3 percent increase and about \$50 less per student than Scott promised as a candidate for re-election last year. However, the state expects at least 32,000 new students next fall, so the new money won't go as far as it may seem. RESOLVED.

**TAX CUTS:** Legislators have informally agreed on a \$400 million tax-cut package for next year featuring a small reduction in the tax on cable and satellite TV service, a 10-day back-to-school sales tax holiday, a one-year sales tax break on college textbooks, and a potpourri of other tax breaks, such as for gun clubs. The package now awaits floor votes in both chambers. UNRESOLVED.

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