



VOICE OF REASON



Frank Ryll, Jr.
President

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Florida Chamber Helps Protect State Transportation Funds – and Florida’s Future

What a difference a year makes. Last year at this time, we were still in shock at the brazen raid of \$200 million from the state’s Transportation Trust Fund. There were taxes paid by the traveling public in Florida for a very specific purpose -- transportation maintenance and improvements. Using those dollars for any other purpose was wrong. Those funds, which were confiscated under the guise of filling immediate budgetary shortfalls, didn’t even come from general revenue sources. They were collected from transportation “user fees” -- gasoline taxes and tag fees -- and did not contribute one dime to the state’s budgetary problems.

This year, however, we mobilized our members and worked closely with our friends at Floridians for Better Transportation, the result was much different – although our success in helping protect Florida’s transportation future certainly did not come without a fight.

Not long after the end of the 2003 Session, whispers around the Capitol could again be heard that the raiders would return in 2004. Almost immediately, a “STOP Highway Robbery” campaign was launched encouraging legislators to avoid the ill-advised temptation to again raid the fund. The campaign included numerous visits with legislators, grassroots email efforts and reasons to avoid again raiding the trust fund.

The efforts appeared to have mixed results as the Florida House sought to divert funds in 2004, but only half as much -- \$100 million -- from the State Transportation Trust Fund. Not about to give up, the Chamber helped coordinate major lobbying efforts, communicated with voters in the districts, and used pressure from local chambers of commerce to make our position crystal clear. It worked, and the Conference Committee on Transportation and Economic Development Appropriations (the joint Senate/House budget committee negotiating the transportation budget) agreed to drop the \$100 million Transportation Trust Fund diversion from the 2004-05 budget.

While the fund was safe for another year, all revenues earmarked for transportation were not. On April 1, the Florida House of Representatives approved a one-month, 10-cent suspension of Florida’s state gas tax. The \$80-90 million proposal would have had a devastating impact on Florida’s transportation system, economy and quality of life. Ultimately, the House and Senate agreed to cutting 8 cents off the state gas tax for August and covering the \$56 million cost with, ironically, a transfer from the General Fund to the State Transportation Trust Fund.

While there is reason to celebrate a session of successfully protecting Florida’s transportation future, there are underlying issues that continue to concern Chamber leadership. For instance, have we forgotten the once clearly understood connection between transportation investments today and economic, safety and quality of life improvements tomorrow? Do we no longer believe that delaying highway safety improvements jeopardizes lives, or do we choose to ignore the fact that traffic accidents are the leading cause of death of young Americans 6 to 28 years of age? What about the fact that delaying highway improvements leads to more traffic congestion and poorer air quality?

While we acknowledge that tough decisions must be made in the budget process, we were the first to remind lawmakers that funding today’s hot items at the expense of the very infrastructure that allows everything to work, makes no sense at all. It is a message we will continue to deliver as long as transportation funds remain in jeopardy.

Transportation is a Florida Business Agenda priority for the Florida Chamber Federation – and that is why the Florida Chamber is making this information available through Federation chambers across the state. For more information on this and other important topics impacting Florida employers, visit us online at www.floridachamber.com.