

Business community concerned about transportation funding

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TALLAHASSEE - A coalition of advocates for improving transportation, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce, said Wednesday that they're worried that lawmakers may raid the state's transportation trust fund to balance the budget. It urged them not to.

Gov. Jeb Bush has suggested dipping into the trust fund, which is mostly made up of aviation fuel and gas tax money that is generally dedicated to transportation spending, including road building projects, airport improvements and security at seaports.

Chamber of Commerce Senior Vice President Paul Ledford said that since transportation spending fuels the economy, it doesn't make sense for lawmakers go along with Bush's suggestion of diverting \$200 million a year over the next five years from the fund into other spending areas. He said gridlock hurts the business community because it slows the movement of goods, but also argued it hurts the state's biggest business, tourism.

"Raiding that trust fund will cost jobs," Ledford said. "We're going to be a quagmire of traffic. No one's going to want to come here to visit."

Doug Callaway, president of Floridians for Better Transportation, said there's another reason for opposing the use of dedicated transportation dollars for other spending needs: principal.

"Why was the transportation trust fund created?" Callaway asked. He argued that it was created to assure taxpayers that the gasoline taxes they pay would be a set aside for road improvements.

The chairmen of the Senate and House budget committees, Sen. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, and Rep. Bruce Kyle, R-Fort Myers, didn't return calls for comment.

The Legislature writes the budget, and doesn't have to follow Bush's recommended spending plan. Lawmakers return to Tallahassee for a two month session starting Tuesday.