



***Why Raiding the Transportation Trust Fund is Shortsighted,
Bad for Florida's Economy, and a Recipe for Gridlock***

By Douglas J. Callaway

When the Florida economy slows down and revenue collections begin to come in below the projections, some folks in Tallahassee always reach for the State Transportation Trust Fund. With a Special Legislative Session on the Budget scheduled for September, \$80 million in TRANSPORTATION funding have *already* been targeted by Governor Charlie Crist, and hundreds of millions more are in jeopardy as well. Though entirely predictable, this is clearly the wrong move at the wrong time. Here's some reasons why.

TRUST in GOVERNMENT should not be an OXY-MORON Everybody who ever bought a gallon of gas paid state and federal taxes with the PROMISE that those gas tax pennies would be held in "TRUST" and used for transportation ONLY. It's an old-fashioned idea of "user pays." Don't drive? You don't have to pay a gas tax for roads. Drive a lot, pay more. Fair is fair. The money is used for things like traffic signals, highways, bridges, maintenance, land to build and widen roads and yes, even city buses and commuter trains like Southeast Florida's Tri-Rail. Taking money out of the Transportation Trust Fund, even dollars from documentary stamps but used for transportation purposes, to pay for *other* government expenses – no matter how worthy – is just plain wrong. Period. (In this case, TRUST ought to stand for **Transportation Revenues Used Strictly for Transportation!**)

When the economy is slowing, don't apply the brakes

When the state spends one dollar on transportation, seven dollars worth of economic activity is generated. After the horrendous acts of 9/11, Florida's economy abruptly stalled as tourism and other spending seized up. Revenue projections nosedived. But instead of cutting transportation, Florida's leaders did the RIGHT THING and got all the ready-to-go transportation projects off the shelf and advance funded them. The economy was kick started with new jobs and a flurry of contracting. In addition to the economic boost, the taxpayers (and gas tax payers) got improvements for commerce, convenience and safety.

The first casualty of a revenue downturn shouldn't be safety

The tragic Minnesota bridge collapse demonstrates so very graphically what happens when transportation infrastructure is short changed. Our budget should not be balanced in a manner that jeopardizes the traveling safety of Florida's 18 million residents or 80 million visitors. Not one single driver should ever have to worry while driving on our highways or bridges because the money we TRUSTED to our leaders got siphoned off.

Traffic congestion is already very bad, why make it worse

It doesn't take a "transportation expert" to understand that traffic congestion in Florida is increasing all the time, and that reducing the amount of state transportation dollars will only make a bad situation worse. Florida's highway lane miles – how large its road network is – only increase at 1.3% annually while our population goes up 2.3% each year. On top of that, Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) – how heavily our road network is used – is increasing at 5.4% annually. Given these sorts of statistics, why would anyone advocate actually reducing Florida's transportation budget – ever?

Soaring costs have already delayed major DOT projects

Quietly during the final months of Gov. Jeb Bush's administration, long-planned road projects were taken off the DOT's work plan. It was not political skulduggery. Prices for critical raw materials – cement, steel, fill dirt and asphalt – rose dramatically. So did labor and transportation. Rebuilding from a flurry of hurricanes in the Southeast, China's industrial revolution, and sharp crude oil price hikes were to blame. Of course booming land prices in Florida did not help either. But stealing from the Trust Fund now can only widen the existing \$23 billion transportation infrastructure "pothole."

Don't Pull the Plug on Smart Growth Management

It was only two years ago that landmark Growth Management legislation (SB 360) was passed providing an additional \$1.1 billion for TRANSPORTATION in 2005, PLUS an additional \$542 million each year thereafter. For the first time, the connection between increased transportation funding and effective growth management was recognized. Now all these good intentions and lofty promises are quickly forgotten and much, and possibly all, of this money is on the chopping block.

Believe me, I could go on and on, but in the interest of the PEOPLE of Florida and their Safety, Freedom & Prosperity, the bottom line is simply this:

We Can't Expect Florida To Move *FORWARD* If Our Transportation System Is Put In REVERSE!

Fortunately, some in the Florida Legislature – especially Senate President Ken Pruitt, Majority Leader Dan Webster, and Transportation & Economic Development (TED) Committee Chairman Mike Fasano – clearly "get it" and are strongly opposing any diversion of Transportation Trust Fund dollars. They deserve our admiration and the full support of every Floridian who cares about their quality of life, their job, and the future of this great state.

Douglas J. Callaway is President of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT). FBT is a statewide business and transportation advocacy association dedicated to making transportation safer and more efficient in Florida. FBT has a growing and diverse membership of businesses, organizations, and individuals, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the Florida Transportation Builders Association, Publix Super Markets, SunTrust Bank, the Florida Institute of Consulting Engineers, the Florida Public Transportation Association, the Florida Ports Council, the Florida MPO Advisory Council, the Florida Airports Council, and numerous local businesses, Chambers of Commerce, MPOs, and transit providers all across the Sunshine State.