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Scott to unveil state budget with tea party organizers in rural Eustis

By Marc Caputo, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

The movement will join him in unveiling a budget big on cuts and short on specifics.

TALLAHASSEE - Rick Scott wants to throw himself a tea party over the Florida budget.

The new Republican governor reached out to tea party organizers to host a budget-rollout event Monday in Eustis, a rural heartland town about 190 miles from the state Capitol - where governors traditionally unveil their spending proposals.

The event underscores Scott's likely commitment to propose a budget with large cuts in spending, fees and taxes - a proposal that has been met with skepticism by legislators, who aren't sure how to slash up to \$2 billion in taxes and fees while the state faces a shortfall that could top \$4 billion next budget year.

But calling for less government spending and revenue is like serving sugar, milk and crumpets to the tea party, an amorphous conservative-leaning movement that fired up the Republican base in November's election.

"I believe Gov. Scott is going to put out a budget that most of us can get behind," said Patricia Sullivan, an event organizer and co-founder of North Lake Tea Party in Lake County.

"The tea party isn't a rubber stamp for anyone," said Sullivan, adding that she's honored Scott reached out to the movement so he could share his budget first with it. She said about 27 groups of roughly 50 have RSVP'd for the event, which could draw thousands Feb. 7 to Eustis' Ferran Park.

Like his predecessor Charlie Crist, Scott has leaked small parts of his proposed budget to friendly media outlets and friendly crowds without being pressed for many details.

On Monday, Scott traveled to the Republican-friendly community of the Villages to call for restructuring state agencies and cutting red tape. He pledged the moves would save taxpayers \$1 billion over two years, but his office provided no concrete details.

In a 246-word news release, Scott said the Department of Community Affairs will cede regulatory powers to other agencies, which he didn't name. The Department of Health will give up regulation of "drugs, devices and cosmetics" to the Department of Business and Professional Regulation, which in turn will turn over alcohol-tax collections to the state's tax-collection agency, the Department of Revenue.

How this all adds up to \$500 million a year in savings is yet to be seen. An aide to Scott said the news release "speaks for itself."

On Saturday, Scott appeared on Fox News - which he'll again address this morning - and pledged to unveil "the most fiscally conservative budget." In the interview, Scott described how he froze nearly 900 regulations he described as "job killers."

In recent weeks, when asked to name a job-killing regulation, Scott has been unwilling or unable to do so.

At the same time, a company called BizCosts.com issued a recent report suggesting that Florida is the best place to do business. It said Florida leads the nation with the number of business-friendly metropolitan areas with five. The Orlando-area grabbed the top spot, Jacksonville was ranked third, Tampa Bay came in seventh, Palm Beach County ranked 16th and Broward County ranked 20th.

"Florida is one of the most pro-business states in the nation," John Boyd Jr., with BizCosts.com, a New Jersey-based company, told the *Orlando Sentinel*. "And it has been for some time."

Also, Democrats and many economists say Florida's tough financial times are the result of a boom-and-bust development cycle that went unchecked by too few regulations on builders and banks.

The leader of the Florida House Democrats, Ron Saunders of Key West, said Scott will have a tough time getting the Republican-controlled Legislature to sign off on his big-ticket budget plans.

In recent weeks, House Speaker Dean Cannon and Senate President Mike Haridopolos - who is running for the U.S. Senate in 2012 - have expressed skepticism over how the state can realistically cut so much from its budget. The shortfall the state faces is primarily in one portion of the budget, accounting for about \$24 billion, that pays for schools, health care and criminal-justice programs. Cutting \$4 billion from that is already tough, especially if the state reduces taxes on top of the shortfall and makes the gap larger.


And that's where tea party activists come in, Saunders said.

"Gov. Scott is reading the tea leaves, literally," Saunders said. "He's sending a message: roll with us, or get rolled over."

The Senate's Republican budget chief, J.D. Alexander, said he was looking forward to the budget rollout in Eustis, which is relatively close in distance and culture to his rural home of Lake Wales. Alexander said Scott's approach was refreshing.

"Most of the people we hear from are people who want something out of the budget, who want more spending," Alexander said. "If Gov. Scott can get taxpayers more engaged, it will be better for the process."

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