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2004 Legislative Session Recap

Session Was Successful But Battles Never End

By Mike Goldie

The 2004 Legislative Session was supposed to be a quiet session as are most election-year sessions. The great majority of election-year sessions are just that — full of promises, no taxes, no real controversial issues and no extended or special sessions — full of sound and thunder and not much substance.



However what was "supposed" to be, wasn't to be for one reason: Speaker John Byrd's campaign for the U.S. Senate. In search of an issue to separate him from a crowded primary field, the speaker decided to repeal the telecommunications rate re-balancing bill of 2003. The governor and the senate opposed the speaker's plan. The speaker was undeterred by their opposition, and with threats to block members' bills and their appropriations, he was successful in passing the repeal in the House. Members who voted against the repeal, were removed from committees, their bills were not heard in committees and their appropriation projects stripped from the appropriation bill.

The speaker's obsession with the repeal colored the two chambers' negotiations with all legislation including the budget. In the end, the budget was passed but a great deal of legislation failed because of the speaker's insistence on the repeal of the phone rate legislation.

On a more positive note, the association's legislative agenda was an overall success.

Water

The only major water bill that passed, HB 293, has been in the process for several years. Sen. Paula Dockery (R-15, Lakeland), per our meeting prior to the session, removed golf courses from several sections of the bill including requiring metering of reserve/reclaimed water and volume-based charges for reuse/reclaimed water. The bill does provide for local governments to include water use in their

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comprehensive plans and provides some incentives for the use of reuse/reclaimed water.

Research Funding

Overall university budgets received an increase from 2003 levels. Program components, such as IFAS, while not receiving enough funding to cover the shortfalls of the last few years, did hold the line for this year. Senator Ken Pruitt (R-28 Port St. Lucie) did, as he told us in our pre-session meeting, keep the IFAS budget intact for FY 2004-05. The governor did end up vetoing several IFAS add-on projects that were not incorporated into the budget.

Property Taxes

CS/SB2444 was the Department of Revenue's legislative package for 2004. The PGA of America amended the bill to provide that when development rights have been restricted or conservation restrictions have been covenanted for land used for an outdoor-recreation purpose (golf course), normal use and maintenance of the land shall not be restricted. Therefore if a public or semi-private course was granted a conservation easement, the normal operation of the golf course could not be restricted.

Editor's note: Mike has lined up four key senators and representatives to champion and support legislative language in next year's IFAS budget that will seek to provide matching funds for all the money raised and donated by the FGCSA and others for turfgrass research. Mike is crafting the language over the summer so that it has statewide appeal and is not a "pet project" of a single legislator and seen as a pork barrel measure, which it isn't. At the same time, thanks to a contact of Vice President Joe Pantaleo, we are also pursuing federal grant money to support turfgrass research in Florida.