

OMINOUS CLOUDS OVER TALLAHASSEE

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By Commissioner Ray Judah

Ominous clouds are forming over Tallahassee as Governor Scott and the State Legislature prepare for the 2011 session.

Foregoing a momentous opportunity to make good on getting people back to work, Governor Scott recently rejected \$2.4 billion in federal funding for high-speed rail between Tampa and Orlando. This transportation project would have served as an important catalyst in the construction of critical infrastructure for the 4th most populous state in the country and 20th largest economy in the world. The private sector businesses that would have built the project were willing to accept the risk of any cost overruns. Studies documenting ridership and operational costs were prematurely ignored. The opportunity to create thousands of jobs, link two of our most populated destination cities, enhance business growth and create a viable alternative to the congested I-4 corridor, was squandered due to lack of visionary leadership.

The governor has also taken a dim view of the importance of Everglades restoration. He opposed the South Florida Water Management District's efforts to acquire land for storage and treatment of polluted water released from Lake Okeechobee. His proposal to reduce the South Florida Water Management District's budget by 25% over the next two years will severely jeopardize protection and management of precious ground and surface water resources, undermine Everglades restoration efforts and allow for rapid degradation of the coastal rivers and estuaries. These waterways are the backbone of our multibillion-dollar tourism and real estate industries and provide 53,000 jobs in Lee County alone.

Governor Scott and the Florida Legislature have opposed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's efforts to implement numeric nutrient standards to manage the unabated discharge of nutrients such as phosphorous and nitrogen in our waterways. The State Legislature's abdication of its responsibility to protect our critical water resources has so greatly impaired more than half of Florida's rivers, springs and lakes that a federal court order was necessary to ensure state compliance of the Clean Water Act to restore and protect water for drinking, swimming and fishing.

The State Legislature's disregard for protecting our waterways from red tide and toxic algae blooms required local communities to adopt fertilizer ordinances to safeguard our environment. Tragically, the State Legislature, including Representative Trudi Williams, chair of the Agriculture & Natural Resources Policy Committee, is following the lead of the fertilizer industry in proposing to preempt local fertilizer management rules to a single statewide model, severely limiting the effective management, application and dispersal of fertilizer.

The governor and Legislature are suggesting that regulations to protect our environment are too expensive and are doing everything in their power, with the help of special interests, to destroy our precious land and water resources. Talk is cheap; we either protect the air we breathe and the water we drink, or we perish.

While turning a blind eye to education, health care and the environment, the Legislature has thus far rejected the overwhelming need to reform the state's tax system. Over the years, the Legislature has granted more than 300 exemptions and exclusions to Florida's sales tax, in excess of \$25 billion, and currently exempts more than collected.

Florida has no personal income tax, so the revenue workhorse is the sales tax. The Legislature could lower the current sales tax rate while simultaneously repealing the exemptions – excluding basics such as rent, groceries, and health care – to generate greater revenue for infrastructure that is critical to economic growth and quality of life. The State Legislature also has refused to recognize the disparity and competition between non-Florida corporations that conduct business in our state without having to pay an Internet sales tax and Florida's brick and mortar businesses that have roots and are struggling to survive in an inequitable business environment.

Governor Scott and the Florida Legislature must demonstrate their resolve to provide a balance in being fiscally prudent with taxpayers' dollars and fulfilling their responsibility to meet the public health, safety and welfare needs of our state.