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When is a water project justified – or just legislative pork?

When he signed the 2014-15 state budget on Monday, Gov. Rick Scott decided not to veto \$88.5 million in local water projects.

The governor had vetoed more than \$50 million in water projects during his previous three budget signings.

Some supporters of environmental programs say the water projects need to go through a better review. “Pork” generally describes budget items that are meant to please voters in specific districts.

Scott met with reporters in Pensacola only briefly after signing the budget on Monday. He touted \$500 million in tax cuts and his office issued a press release with supportive statements from environmental groups.

“I looked at every line to say, ‘Are we getting a return for our taxpayers, is this good for citizens?’” Scott said.

Florida TaxWatch, which had recommended vetoes of water projects in 2011 and 2012, held back in 2013 after the House and Senate held public hearings on them. The group labels projects it says should be vetoed as “budget turkeys.”

There were no such hearings this year in the House and Senate on applications for water projects.

During budget debate last month, Senate Democratic leader Chris Smith of Fort Lauderdale thanked senators for being agreeable to local spending projects, adding, “And I dare call them ‘turkeys.’”

“There are a lot of things in the budget that may get some scrutiny later,” Smith said. “But you have people — not bureaucrats — putting them in because the people elected us to come up here and do that.”

TaxWatch Vice President of Tax Research Kurt Wenner says that although his group didn't recommend vetoes this year, there still should be a better process to determine whether there is enough money to complete projects or ensure they are truly needed.

“Maybe it will take a legislator who can't get their things funded through the norm now to say, ‘Let's get it right,’” Wenner said.

Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon Florida, said setting priorities based on political influence rather than environmental criteria is never good.

Former Sen. Paula Dockery, a Lakeland Republican, said the water projects represent needed spending, but she also said there is a need for prioritization.

In 2005, she sponsored a bill that created the Water Protection and Sustainability Program at the Department of Environmental Protection to receive \$100 million a year to assist in many water development programs. But the program received \$100 million only in 2005-06 and by 2009-10, it received nothing.

Dockery, now a syndicated newspaper columnist, said the program, if it were funded, would provide a way for members to advocate for their local projects while establishing a process for those projects to receive scrutiny. But she says any spending on environmental restoration is good.

“If the choice was no money spent or money (spent) that didn't go through a process,” she said. “I would take the money spent.”

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