

From the *St. Petersburg Times*

University students rally for more funding

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TALLAHASSEE — University students descended on the Florida capital Thursday to lobby the governor and lawmakers for millions more in state funding, but their pitch came just hours after House Speaker Larry Cretul released lean budget numbers and a warning that education programs will face "significant reductions."

More than 200 students joined lawmakers and university system leaders in front of the Old Capitol building during a noon rally organized by the Florida Student Association to build support for the 11 universities' "New Florida Initiative," which seeks \$1.75 billion in additional state support over the next five years to help raise the caliber of Florida's workforce and economy.

As the first step toward that goal, Gov. Charlie Crist is asking lawmakers to direct an additional \$100 million in taxpayer dollars each year for Florida universities and \$67 million for state and community colleges. Leading lawmakers have shown little interest in that proposal, warning instead that cuts are coming yet again to universities and community colleges that have already lost tens of millions of dollars in recent years.

Still, the students who traveled to Tallahassee by bus and carpool Thursday were optimistic. "The governor wouldn't ask if it couldn't happen," said FSA chairman John Barnes, 23, student body president of the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

During the lunchtime rally, they waved signs that read, "My Florida, My Future" while Florida A&M University's famous marching band provided an lively soundtrack. Students said struggling schools need more dollars to keep talented professors, expand competitive degree programs and provide sufficient courses to meet growing enrollments.

"The bigger picture is to diversify Florida's economy," said Nick Autiello, 19, a sophomore at Florida International University in Miami. "The quality of the programs are going to suffer; the best brains are going to leave."

Later Thursday, student body presidents of the 11 universities met with Crist, Chancellor Frank Brogan and Board of Governors chairwoman Ava Parker to discuss their campus' funding needs. Crist reiterated his desire to send more money to the institutions, home to more than 300,000 students.

The upbeat tone of the rally and meeting stood in contrast with the budget picture painted Thursday morning by Cretul.

In a memo to House representatives outlining the budget allocations for various areas including education and health care, the Ocala Republican warned that "significant reductions to recurring state spending will be needed to achieve and maintain a balanced budget," given the 2010-11 deficit of as much as \$3 billion and the "long range financial outlook" that shows a shortfall exceeding \$5 billion for FY 2011-12 when the federal stimulus will have dried up.

His budget includes a little more than \$3 billion in recurring general revenue and \$738.5 million in Lottery revenues for higher education. Cretul and Senate President Jeff Atwater have stressed repeatedly in recent weeks that while they value the state's higher education institutions, the recession means they will face cuts just like other agencies.

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