

NAPLES — At state government offices in downtown Fort Myers, a transition from one Florida governor to the next usually doesn't mean much more than changing the governor's official photo in the lobby.

Not this time.

As talk swirls in Tallahassee about new [Gov. Rick Scott](#)'s proposals to cut the state budget, slash the state work force, and require state employees to put 5 percent of their pay into their pension plans, employees are on edge and their pride is taking a hit.

Those that are willing to talk — and not many are — use words like “panic” when discussing the mood in their offices.

“It hurts, it really hurts feelings-wise that people aren't considering what they do on a daily basis and the job they do,” said Karen Salafia, an audit supervisor for the Department of Revenue in Fort Myers. “They hear all this stuff from the Legislature and the governor and it's like, ‘Ugh.’”

Scott campaigned on a promise to cut government and vowed to reduce the state work force by 5 percent. He asked for that and more in his first proposed budget on Monday.

Scott called for nearly \$5 billion in spending cuts from the state's \$70.4 billion budget, including eliminating 8,681 of Florida's 126,765 state jobs — a nearly 7 percent cut, according to his LetsGetToWork.net website. The Department of Children & Families and the Department of Corrections each would lose more than 1,500 jobs this year under Scott's plan.

Scott also called for eliminating another 4,106 positions next year, which would mean cutting more than 12,700 state jobs — or 10 percent of the state work force — in two years. More than 2,000 of the cuts would be positions that are currently vacant, according to media reports.

“They are clearly under pressure,” Peter Bergerson, a [Florida Gulf Coast University](#) political scientist, said of state workers.

“They are the focus of his attempt to balance the budget,” said Bergerson, himself a state employee. “There's just no question about it.”

Scott's proposal is little more than a request of state lawmakers, who will construct the final bill in a legislative session that begins in March.

### **Quotable**

“Surprise to everybody, I put out a budget that people said ‘Well gosh, I didn't realize you were going to do what you said you were going to do,’” Gov. Rick Scott told about

600 people who attended a \$100-a-plate luncheon this past week in Naples sponsored by the libertarian Cato Institute.

## Documents

- [Gov. Scott's proposed 2011 budget](#)

But while his proposals are a bitter pill for some state employees, Scott said no one should be surprised, unless of course they missed the \$80 million in campaign ads he ran prior to his election.

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When asked in early February if state employees had any reason to be concerned about their jobs, Scott said “No.”

“We’ll be creating opportunities for people to move around,” he said.

Still, many state employees are worried.

“They’re afraid. They’re concerned. They feel disrespected,” said Jim Baiardi, president of the corrections chapter of the Florida Police Benevolent Association and a corrections officer in a South Florida prison.

Working in a Florida prison is like working in a war zone, Baiardi said, and he doesn’t believe cuts should come from public safety.

“The number one public job would be to protect the citizens,” Baiardi said. “I think the state should make that its priority.”

However, Scott has singled out corrections as an area that is ripe for savings.

Scott dubbed his budget proposal a “jobs budget,” part of his plan to create 700,000 new jobs in seven years. Some state employees see slashing the state work force as contradictory.

“I don’t see a contradiction there at all,” said Bob Sanchez, policy director for the conservative James Madison Institute think tank in Tallahassee. “Money diverted from the private sector to government, which is not always prudent in the way it spends it, does diminish the resources available to the private sector to create ... jobs.”

Scott didn’t propose any cuts to the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, but many Florida Highway Patrol troopers are concerned about his proposed changes to

the state's public pension plan, said Cale Stevens, a veteran of the force who is the union representative for Southwest Florida troopers.

Scott would transition the pension from defined benefit to a defined contribution plan, and would require state employees to contribute 5 percent of their pay, something they've never done. Florida is the only state that doesn't require employees to contribute to their pension, but to many state employees Scott's proposal is akin to a 5 percent pay cut.

### **By the numbers**

Starting salary for a trooper is \$33,977.04 a year in most of Florida, and \$38,976.84 in Collier, Lee, Palm Beach, Broward, Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, according to the FHP.

Department of Corrections trainees take home \$28,007.20 annually, while certified corrections officers earn \$30,807.92 to \$45,033.82, according to the department.

Collier road patrol deputy and jail trainees, who are going through certification, start at \$37,970 a year, while certified road patrol and jail deputies earn \$40,828 to \$45,414 annually, depending on experience, according to the Collier County Sheriff's Office.

"We stay here because we love the agency and we love the job," Stevens said. "But now they're proposing taking 5 percent away from us. For a lot of us, we're already living on the edge of our means."

Stevens, a father of two from Venice, said his wife is also a trooper, so the proposed pension change would be a double whammy for his family. His kids would have to cut back on extracurricular activities, he said, and his family would have to cut back in general.

State trooper and corrections officers generally make less than their counterparts at county sheriff's offices and city police departments, Stevens and Baiardi said.

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"I'd always foreseen that this time in my life, my children would have a better life than they have," Baiardi said.

Stevens said he knows that some of his colleagues are trying to get jobs at local sheriff's offices.

"Most of them don't see the light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

Salafia, of the Department of Revenue, said most of the workers in her office make less than \$40,000, haven't had a raise in six years and already are having a hard time making ends meet. Other workers at the office complex on Victoria Avenue voiced similar sentiments last week as they came and went, but most were either too afraid for their jobs to give their names or had been instructed not to talk to the press.

"We've just got to keep doing our jobs and keep a positive attitude about everything we do," Salafia said.

Local lawmakers understand they'll have tough decisions to make in Tallahassee.

Kathleen Passidomo on Newsmakers

### **Quotable**

"I don't think any of us can say anything to satisfy a person who is worried about losing their job," state Rep. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples said, adding, "We're looking at the health of the state at large and how we can get the economic engine back to work. That's our goal."

State Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, called Scott's proposal the starting line, not necessarily the finish line. State employees, he said, shouldn't over-react.

State Rep. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, agreed, saying that for state workers "it's too soon to panic."

"I don't think any of us can say anything to satisfy a person who is worried about losing their job," she said, adding, "We're looking at the health of the state at large and how we can get the economic engine back to work. That's our goal."

Officials pointed out that the economic downturn has been difficult on private sector workers, too. Many Florida businesses have shed jobs over the last few years and cut their employees' pay.

"There will be some cuts," said Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers. "I know it's hard on employees right now because they don't know who is cutting who. ... Nobody in the Legislature wants people to lose their job.

"But it's government, and government is notoriously fat."

### **Budget at a glance**

Total budget: \$65.9 billion, down from \$70.4 billion

Cut to state work force: 8,645 positions

Operational efficiencies, consolidation and reorganization of government functions: \$1 billion over two years

Business tax cut: 5.5 percent to 3 percent

Property tax cut: \$1.4 billion over two years

Funding for Everglades restoration: \$17 million, down from \$50 million

Education cuts: \$3.3 billion in federal funds

Medicaid: \$4 billion savings over two years, in part by creating a "patient-directed system"

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