

Tampa Bay Times

Scott's veto of planning council money hurts local governments and state's future, say critics

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For 50 years, the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council has been working with local governments — helping them find the best routes for hurricane evacuation, assisting them in attracting new businesses, assessing how a shopping center built in one city might affect the traffic in neighboring areas.

It's one of 11 regional planning councils that perform similar duties all over Florida. For the past 26 years, the 11 councils have gotten millions of dollars in state funding because they carry out state-mandated duties for the local governments.

Last year, Gov. Rick Scott broke that 26-year string, vetoing any state funding for the regional planning councils. In April, he did it again.

When a *Times* reporter asked why, Scott said his standard questions on vetoes were: "Is it a statewide project, did it go through a good process, is it something that we've seen returns?" But he would not comment specifically on his veto of the planning council funding, referring questions to his staff.

In an e-mail, Scott spokeswoman Amy Graham said he vetoed the funding because "Gov. Scott felt there was a lack of performance measures documenting the effectiveness of regional planning councils to justify state funding."

That was the same reason for the veto last year, too.

"That's disappointing," said Scott Koons, executive director of the North Central Florida Regional Planning Council and chairman of the Florida Regional Planning Council Association. After the last veto, the association put together a five-page presentation on its work for Scott, showing how over seven years it had helped persuade federal officials to hand out grants to 60 projects across the state that created or retained 13,700 jobs. It failed to persuade him to spare the money.

Koons said last year's veto led to layoffs at some of the councils, and predicted this year's veto would lead to more layoffs as well as a slowdown of their work for local governments.

The double veto makes critics like Charles Pattison of 1,000 Friends of Florida question Scott's understanding of the role the regional planning councils play in guiding the state's growth.

When Scott rejected \$2 billion in federal funding for high-speed rail last year, he based his decision in part on a study written by Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, a think tank partly owned by conservative billionaires Charles and David Koch. O'Toole has also written studies and even a book, *Best Laid Plans*, blasting all government planning agencies and calling for them to be closed.

At a Cato Institute seminar in Naples last year, Scott praised the think tank's persuasive arguments on political issues, adding, "I don't know why anybody would think the other way." Graham did not respond to a question about whether Scott had read O'Toole's anti-planning writings.

Last year, Scott and the Legislature dismantled the state Department of Community Affairs, which oversaw the growth plans of Florida's 67 counties and 410 municipalities, and gutted the 1985 Growth Management Act. When Scott vetoed funding for the councils, Pattison said, "Maybe this is part of a consistent pattern."

The planning councils used to have to meet performance measures in order to get the state funding, said Jim Murley, executive director of the South Florida Regional Planning Council and a former Department of Community Affairs secretary. The problem, Murley said, is that those standards that Scott wants were set by the state agency that Scott dismantled.

The amount of money Scott has vetoed for the councils each year — \$2.5 million — is less than one-half of 1 percent of the entire state budget, Pattison pointed out, calling it "a minimal investment in the state's future."

Graham noted that the regional planning councils get money from other sources. One major source: the city and county governments that the councils serve. But those governments also have serious budget woes.

"There's no way I could go to them and ask for an increase," said Terry Josephs, executive director of the West Florida Regional Planning Council, which covers part of the Panhandle. "I mentioned that possibility to a couple of them. Their response — well, you would not be able to print that."

Grants and other sources covered some of the lost funding last year, said Manny Pumariega, executive director of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council, but coping with the veto required them, essentially, to do less with less. For instance, in reviewing

growth plans, they scaled back the detail and focused more on factors such as job creation and less on, say, affordable housing.

"There's not much more we can pare down now," Pumariega said.

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