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CORRECTIONS DEPARTMENT FIGHTING CUTS

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Gov. Charlie Crist's administration is sounding the alarm about the Legislature's proposed budget cuts to the Department of Corrections, warning it could trigger the early release of inmates. "We are fighting this tooth and nail to make sure this doesn't come to fruition," said Walt McNeil, the department's secretary. The agency's budget in the Senate would lead to the closure of five prisons, including two to accommodate the opening of a privately run prison along the Blackwater River in the Panhandle. The \$110 million Blackwater facility was added to the Senate budget at the last minute by chief budget writer J.D. Alexander.

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LeMieux's wife has baby girl

Sen. George LeMieux and his wife, Meike, are celebrating a new addition to their clan - a baby girl. LeMieux announced the news via Twitter. "It's a Girl!," he wrote. The girl, born at 2:35 p.m. Monday, has three brothers: Max, Taylor and Chase.

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Two days focusing on the budget

Legislators have a short workweek to recognize the Passover and Easter holidays, but when they return on Wednesday and Thursday, it will be budget, budget all the time. The House is expected to pass its spending plan on Thursday, after taking up amendments to its \$67 billion proposal. The Senate is expected to take up its budget as well, and pass it the following week. Legislators must then work out their differences. The two budgets remain more than \$2 billion apart.

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Democrats flunk GOP leadership

House Democratic lawmakers issued a midsession report card for the Republican leadership. And like you probably guessed: straight F's. The subjects: restoring public trust, improving education, helping small businesses and the middle class, and putting the people's priorities first. In the area of job creation, the GOP received a charitable "incomplete."

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OVERHEARD

"It is difficult to believe that (Gov. Charlie) Crist can be unaware of that."

Cato Institute blogger Chris Moody, on how the fiscally conservative think tank downgraded Crist's rating in 2009.

Times/Herald staff writers John Frank and Mary Ellen Klas; Times staff writer Alex Leary

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