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FEATURED

Governor vetoes include college air conditioning project

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Aerial photo of The College of the Florida Keys in Key West. Gov. DeSantis recently vetoed \$3.5 million to modernize the college's 50-year-old air conditioning system.

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Gov. Ron DeSantis recently approved and signed the final budget for the fiscal year 2026-2027. He vetoed more than \$800 million from a \$114.5 billion spending plan, and among the vetoes was a request for an infrastructure project for The College of the Florida Keys.

DeSantis vetoed \$3.5 million for CFK's Chiller Plant Infrastructure project, which would go toward improving the college's air conditioning system that is currently estimated to cost around \$7 million in total.

The request, made by CFK President **Jonathan Gueverra** and sponsored by state Sen. Ana Maria Rodriguez, R-Doral, and state Rep. Jim Mooney, R-Islamorada, was originally filed for the fiscal year 2025-2026 budget but was vetoed last year by the governor. The funding request was filed again this year, but only for half the amount.

"The College's Chiller Plant, which is the cooling system for the entire Key West Campus, is over 50 years old and needs to be repaired, modernized, and expanded to ensure safe and comfortable conditions for students, employees, and visitors," wrote Amber Ernst-Leonard, associate vice president, on behalf of the college.

Ernst-Leonard stated that the college has concerns about their current air conditioning system which, while functional, is in critical need of renovation. She also stated that the project would install functional air conditioning into the college's Welding Lab.

"The existing underground chilled water loop, responsible for distributing chilled water to buildings across campus, is aging and increasingly prone to failures. These failures have resulted in costly emergency repairs, disruptions to campus activities, and increased energy and water consumption," wrote Ernst-Leonard.

"Continued breakdowns may affect student enrollment and employee productivity. The proposed project involves comprehensive renovation and improvement of the underground chilled water loop and other related infrastructure and running a new line to the Welding Lab."

The News Service of Florida reported on DeSantis' comments over the budget cuts made for the fiscal year.

“The things that we vetoed, a lot of those are just either inappropriate or maybe nice to have. Nice to have is fine, but I want to fund things that we have to have,” DeSantis said.

The College of the Florida Keys is one of hundreds of other schools and organizations that had funding vetoed in DeSantis’ effort to keep a conservative budget. The Florida Keys Children’s Shelter, based in Tavernier, was another Florida Keys organization impacted by the vetoes.

Despite the setback, the college expressed their gratitude for the support from local representatives as they decide on a path forward.

“We appreciate the support of Representative Mooney and Senator Rodriguez and others in the legislature as well as support staff who recognized the critical need to update our chiller plant and have supported this project for the past two years,” Ernst-Leonard wrote.

Ernst-Leonard said the college continues to explore their options, considering other grants and funding opportunities to improve their air conditioning systems.

“We will likely include it as we develop our legislative priorities for the next legislative session,” Ernst-Leonard wrote. “Until then, we will continue to address urgent repairs using funds from our limited capital budget, which also supports repairs and maintenance to classrooms, labs, and other student spaces.”

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