

KEYSWEEKLY

STATE BUDGET BENEFITS FLORIDA KEYS; SOME REQUESTS WERE VETOED

By **Jim McCarthy** - July 1, 2026



Gov. Ron DeSantis poses with the freshly-unveiled statue of James Monroe – one of several placed around the state of Florida in counties named after Founding Fathers during a visit in February. CONTRIBUTED

A state budget signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis on June 29 will send tens of millions of dollars to the Florida Keys.

But not all local projects received state funding.

In total, DeSantis vetoed \$1.7 billion from a budget the state Legislature approved during a special session in May. With the governor's cuts, the total spending for the 2026-27 fiscal year, which begins July 1, will be \$117.6 billion.

Among the items vetoed were \$3.5 million to update the College of the Florida Keys' air conditioning system. The college, in its request to the state for funding, said the current infrastructure is "increasingly unable to meet the growing demand for cooling services." The Legislature included the funding in its approved budget.

The college said it is exploring grants and other funding opportunities to fund this critical project.

"We will likely include it as we develop our legislative priorities for the next legislative session. 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," said Amber Ernst-Leonard, associate vice president.

The veto didn't necessarily single out CFK, as roughly 30 other college-related projects for about \$20 million were axed by the governor.

CFK did receive \$11.6 million in operating funds, as well as \$719,191 in performance-based funding. The performance-based funding includes \$21,115 for the 2+2 Student Success Incentive Fund, \$662,553 for the Prepping Institutions, Programs, Employers, and Learners through Incentives for Nursing Education, and \$35,253 for the Work Florida Student Success Incentive Fund.

DeSantis also slashed \$500,000 for the Florida Keys Children's Shelter to establish a new transitional living program in the Upper Keys. The shelter originally asked for \$1 million but legislators approved \$500,000, which DeSantis vetoed. The project would have expanded housing and support services for older youths' (ages 18-22) transition to independence.

"Right now, they don't have anywhere to go," said Ben Kemmer, children's shelter CEO. "It's pretty disappointing, but we're going to make it happen within the next year or two. It was the No. 1 goal in our four-year strategic plan, so our board is all in on making it happen."

Kemmer said the organization plans to work with individuals and foundations in the community to get the project off the ground, but they'll also look to apply for state funding next year.

Vetoed by the governor can be overturned by two-thirds vote of the Florida House and Senate.



Despite these cuts, Florida Keys municipalities and organizations came away with around \$60 million in funding from the state.

"I think in the big picture we did really well," state Rep. Jim Mooney told Keys Weekly following the governor's budget signing. "I'm always disappointed when stuff gets axed, especially for organizations like the children's shelter. We're working with the Department of Health on how to get that request postured for next year."

"I always said appropriations are not what you run your organization on, as it's truly icing on the cake," Mooney continued. "If you get it, good. If you don't, you should still be able to operate."

A program supporting water quality projects in the Keys received \$20 million. Known as the Florida Keys Stewardship Act, it allows local municipalities to use state dollars to restore and clean murky canals or improve stormwater infrastructure. Funds can also be used for land acquisition.

An affordable housing project in Key West received \$5 million. That will allow for the construction of 150 units of housing on land owned by the Monroe County School Board. Employees of the school district would get first priority, followed by local and state government employees and essential service personnel in the county. The district also received \$1.75 million for the renovation of Bruce Hall, where staff will relocate from the current administrative building at 241 Trumbo Road, and the historic Reynolds School, the future site for adult education and district maintenance.

A total of \$10 million in state funds is going toward the Florida Keys Aqueduct's Crawl Key reverse osmosis plant. The new facility aims to enhance emergency water supply capacity by 4 million gallons, ensuring a continuous and reliable water service to citizens during times of crisis. The project will also address the need for additional water supply due to population growth and provide an additional backup water source to curb reliance on the Biscayne aquifer.



Marathon will get \$2.5 million for a deep injection well project, which consolidates effluent from five wastewater treatment plants. Key West received \$3 million for a Stock Island landfill remediation feasibility study and \$2.5 million for stormwater enhancements, wastewater improvements and phase one of a Mallory Square area pump station and resilience project.

Islamorada collectively received \$1,375,000 for expansion of the village's rideshare program, a schools to neighborhood pedestrian project, a breakwater project at Sea Oats Beach and improvements to the North Plantation Key pump station. Key Colony Beach got \$475,000 for beach water reclamation facility improvements.

A total of \$750,000 was secured for local Habitat for Humanity affordable housing projects. And Keys AHEC, now known as Keys Kids Health Centers, received \$500,000 to support its children's medical and dental program.

Funds were also secured for Pigeon Key — \$600,000 for a hurricane restoration and protection project —, and \$50,000 for a Harry S. Truman Little White House restoration project.

State Sen. Ana Maria Rodriguez said she was pleased to see Florida Keys projects funded. She said the state's investments in the island chain will strengthen critical infrastructure, support the local economy, enhance public safety and improve residents' quality of life.

"While no budget is perfect, I believe this one strikes a responsible balance between meeting today's needs and protecting Florida's long-term financial health," she said.



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Jim McCarthy is one of the many who escaped the snow and frigid temperatures in Western New York. A former crime & court reporter and city editor for two Western New York newspapers, Jim has been honing his craft since he graduated from St. Bonaventure University in 2014. In his 5-plus years in the Keys, Jim has enjoyed connecting with the community. Jim is past president of the Key Largo Sunset Rotary Club. When he's not working, he's busy chasing his son, Lucas, around the house and enjoying time with family.

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