

DeSANTIS VETOES \$500 MILLION FROM STATE BUDGET



Gov. Ron DeSantis signs a \$116.5-billion budget on June 15 in Fort Pierce. DeSantis vetoed some \$510 million from the spending plan. GOVERNOR'S OFFICE/Contributed

FUNDS AXED FOR KEY COLONY BEACH & ISLAMORADA PROJECTS

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed more than \$500 million from a legislatively-approved budget on June 15 in Fort Pierce. Two budget items eliminated by the governor affected projects in Key Colony Beach and Islamorada.

Of the \$510.9 million in projects and programs DeSantis vetoed, \$1 million was taken out of the budget for the repair and hardening of Key Colony Beach's city hall. Constructed in the late 1950s, the building was ravaged by Hurricane Irma in 2017 and deemed unusable for the last six years.

City officials are seeking a new building for staff and the Key Colony Beach Police Department, as well as space for meetings and events. Two bids came back on the project: an \$8.3-million proposal from Miami-based Hands On Builders LLC and a \$12.4-million proposal from Mobile, Alabama-based Persons Services Corporation.

"We want to thank Senator Ana Maria Rodriguez, Representative Jim Mooney and our lobbying firm for all the help and support," KCB City Administrator David Turner told the Weekly. "We tried very hard lobbying in Tallahassee, but didn't make the cut."

DeSantis also vetoed a \$250,000 line item for an Islamorada village council chambers and public works facility feasibility study. The dais conducts meetings inside the Founders Park Community Center, which lacks the capacity to house a large number of residents who attend to listen or speak on a matter. In some instances, residents are left waiting outside to enter the center to speak on contentious matters, like

the vote on the Crooked Palm Distillery request in December.

Islamorada Mayor Buddy Pinder said he wasn't fazed by the news of DeSantis' veto. Despite not receiving the \$250,000, the village received \$190,000 for a new ambulance and \$300,000 for storage facilities for emergency backup generators. The village will also receive a portion of the \$20-million Florida Keys Stewardship Act.

"Is it justifiable that we have to have new council chambers right now? Not really," Pinder said. "We received funds for much-needed projects that save lives with fire rescue."

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— State Rep. Jim Mooney

Islamorada Village Manager Ted Yates said the village's need for a dedicated public works facility and council chamber remains a priority as he intends to propose funding for the study during this year's budget hearings.

Mooney told the Keys Weekly that he was surprised about some of the vetoes across the district, which totaled around \$1.8 million. Two projects totaling \$575,000 in Homestead were vetoed by the governor.

"One thing held true on the vetoes; a lot of them were local infrastructure appropriations," he said. "You always want to bat 1,000%. But at the end of the day, the KCB appropriation was a big hit."

DeSantis' larger vetoes included \$100 million for conservation and rural land protection easements and agreements, \$30.8 million for land acquisition of a Kirkland ranch and \$20 million for a University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee STEM and nursing facility. Last year, he vetoed \$3.1 billion in the budget.

With the vetoes, DeSantis signed a spending plan for the upcoming fiscal year that totals \$116.5 billion. In addition to the Stewardship Act funds granted to Monroe County, the budget includes \$5 million for land acquisition and \$6.25 million for the new county emergency operations center under construction in Marathon. Some \$650,000 was granted for mobile vessel pump-out, \$1.6 million for 100 new moorings near Boca Chica channel and an area off Wisteria Island and \$10 million for a new artificial reef program.

"I am so pleased the governor included critical funding for Monroe County in his budget," Mayor Craig Cates said. "This budget shows us the state is invested in our economic stability and the future of the Florida Keys."

Everglades restoration projects will receive \$694 million, while \$796 million will go toward water quality improvements throughout the state. Funding for early childhood education totals \$1.6 billion, and \$1.1 billion will go to raises for teachers and other eligible instructional personnel. A total of \$4 billion will support transportation projects to address congestion.

"Through this year's budget, we have cemented an economic framework which supports Florida's families, business owners and students in the pursuit of a prosperous future," DeSantis said.

— Alex Rickert contributed to this article.