

Gaetz talks development, budget cuts in Destin

[Fraser Sherman](#)

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Requiring developers to pay for putting more cars on the road says that “if you bring jobs to this state, we’re going to penalize you,” State Sen. Don Gaetz told Destin Rotary this week.

Gaetz said one of his successes in the 2009 legislative session was a bill that rewrites Florida’s growth-management laws, eliminating a requirement that developers compensate for added traffic by paying for road improvements.

“The biggest problem in the state at that time was managing all this runaway growth,” Gaetz said, pointing out that growth would be welcome in Florida’s economy these days. “For 75 percent of the people of Florida, concurrency is now gone. (It’s) late, but better that we do this now.”

Gaetz said he’d done his best this year to hold the line against legislators who balked at cutting spending or wanted to balance the budget by tax increases. He said it’s been tough because for the 10 years preceding his 2006 senate election, state revenue had grown 4 percent every year.

“The number one budget issue was how are we going to spend the new money? That became the culture of Tallahassee ... They didn’t expect to have less, they expected to have more money.”

State revenue in the next fiscal year would have been \$85 billion if 4 percent growth had continued, Gaetz said, but instead it’s only \$61 billion.

As a result, Gaetz said, the legislature cut \$8 billion out of the budget, including “cuts in health care I was agonizing over,” though classroom education was protected.

“Some of the cutting was hard, some we should have done a long time ago,” Gaetz said.

“Recessions reveal what audits miss.”

Among the cuts and changes Gaetz listed:

- Eliminating 800 state jobs that paid more than \$75,000 a year, but weren’t essential positions.
- Saving more than \$100 million a year by cracking down on Medicaid fraud.
- Almost completely eliminating the airplanes used by state officials.
- Boosting the cigarette tax by \$1 a pack. Gaetz said that was justified because smokers on Medicaid cost taxpayers an extra \$2 billion a year.
- Increases in court costs, drivers license fees and vehicle registration fees.

Gaetz said he didn’t want to increase fees, but it was preferable to alternatives such as a state income tax, a higher sales tax or reviving Florida’s intangibles tax — and there was too much resistance to making further cuts.

“We’ve got 40 senators, and I have to learn to count to 21,” Gaetz said. “I thought the least worst alternative was to do what we did.”

Gaetz said increasing gambling’s role in the state economy was another bad alternative: The more the state became dependent on gambling tax revenue, the more gambling would be allowed to spread.

In the long run, the senator said, Florida can't cut or tax itself out of the recession: The state economy has to grow. That, he said, is why it was important to eliminate the concurrency restrictions on development, and the requirement that "developments of regional impact" must consult with local governments around them, not just the jurisdiction the land is located in.

Gaetz said he was also fighting to change the state's system for attracting businesses with tax breaks and incentives. Currently, he said, every dollar of incentive has to be offset by a spending cut without considering how much revenue the incentive will generate in the future. If that doesn't change, he said, or the state won't be able to compete with Alabama and Georgia for new business.

Gaetz said that with the military as one of the three top drivers of the Florida economy, he cosponsored the Military Protection Act this legislative session. The act establishes a council that will "use the full authority and necessary resources of the state government to preserve and strengthen the military presence," according to a Gaetz news release.

Gaetz said more cuts were needed and he encouraged his audience to hold him to that: "I hope we can maintain a kind of conservative approach to budgeting ... You need to hold me responsible."

Want to know more? To learn about every bill Sen. Gaetz sponsored and co-sponsored, click on his Web page at www.flsenate.gov.