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Legislators Deluged With Funding Pleas

By Bill Rufty
The Ledger

BARTOW -- The annual meeting of the Polk County legislative delegation Monday evening might best be summed up in a single word: money.

Most of the more than 30 speakers who appeared before the delegation in the County Commission chambers asked for local legislators' support for additional funding for such things as local government projects, civic improvements and the arts.

After two bleak years of funding from the Legislature, due in part to the poor economy in tourist-dependent Florida, some groups appeared almost at the point of collapse.

Lisa Whidden of Auburndale, president of the board for the American Heart Association's Florida-Puerto Rico affiliate, said that the state cut the \$39 million annual budget for smoking prevention in the schools to a mere \$1 million.

Polk Community College President Larry Durrence told legislators that community colleges' budgets are so low students are being turned away. "There is a severe nursing shortage, yet we can't afford to hire the additional nursing professors to meet the need or to teach the additional students," he said.

Mulberry officials asked for help obtaining \$600,000 to make water treatment plant improvements ordered by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Rep. Dennis Ross, R-Lakeland, said he has tried twice and will try again to get the money in the new state budget.

Capt. Dan Drew of the Polk County Sheriff's Office told the delegation that the county's juvenile boot camp, which aims to turn youthful offenders around, is \$600,000 short of what it needs to handle the number of kids sent to the facility.

Lakeland wants \$470,000 in matching money to expand the children's section of its library, Winter Haven hopes for \$2 million to go toward a \$4 million project to revitalize the Florence Villa Community Redevelopment Area, Lake Wales needs money for renovating a historic building and to build a soccer field so its youths don't have to travel to Bartow to play.

The requests went on and on.

Damon Hostetler and more than 30 other members of the Combee Area Revitalization Effort asked for help in improving their neighborhood.

"The county didn't have the funds to fix North Combee Road and since it is also state-supported, we are hoping for help here," he said. "We also want to revitalize Saddle Creek."

The pleas received sympathetic attention from legislators. Funding proposals are being compiled before the March 2 convening of the 2004 Florida Legislature.

"We will do everything possible," said delegation Chairwoman Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland. "But I have to tell you it will be another difficult year."

While money requests took up most of the hearing, the delegation received other requests as well. Lake Wales wants help establishing an enterprise zone to attract new businesses. Lakeland needs help in changing its 12-year and 16-year term limits to accommodate an extra year that commissioners and the mayor will have to serve so new election dates can be implemented.

Rep. Frank Attkisson, R-Kissimmee, whose district includes Southeastern Polk, said he thinks that Lakeland voters should decide that issue, not the Legislature.

But his fellow lawmakers said they would draw up the local bill and await comment from city residents.

Earlier in the day, the Polk County Commission presented its wish list to legislators -- a series of support requests that ranged from Medicaid transportation to increasing wireless phone fees to cover Polk's 911 costs.

While thanking Dockery for accomplishing the difficult task of reducing the number of water management districts in the county from three to two, commissioners asked for a continued watchful eye on water issues.

They also asked for help in funding. At the top of that list was more than \$6 million for the construction phases of the Haines City and Lake Wales Health Department clinics.

Commissioners said they needed \$280,000 to complete work on the Polk County Agricultural Center.