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Our Opinion: Don't raid the fund

When you set up a personal trust fund, the idea is to ensure that, no matter what happens, sustained support will be provided to your children or a favorite organization.

But if the state of Florida were a family, the spendthrift uncle would find a way to dip his hands into that money, leaving the children with little or nothing.

You see, Florida has a problem with trust funds. Whenever there's a budget crunch, the state wants to help itself to the Lawton Chiles Endowment Fund (funded by the state's tobacco settlement, for health and education), the Sadowski Trust Fund (funded through doc stamps, for affordable housing), the Florida Communities Trust program (helping local governments create parks and greenways), even a trust fund intended to cover the costs of concealed-weapons licensing.

One that escaped unscathed last year, thanks to a veto by then-Gov. Charlie Crist, was the state's Transportation Trust Fund. But this year, the House is proposing a \$330 million raid that would have a severe impact not just on the maintenance of our highways but on the jobs that Florida so desperately needs.

Road maintenance is one thing the state does well. Florida's highways are in good shape, and you don't see frightening news reports of bridges on state roads collapsing into rivers. Part of the reason is the trust fund, which gets its money partly from documentary stamps but mostly from a gasoline tax and tag and title fees. It's a true user fee, with drivers enjoying the direct benefits of the taxes they pay.

In 2009, in order to put more money into the fund, the Legislature increased vehicle registration fees. At a time when any hint of new taxes can mean political death, it's important to remember that this was a *fee* increase. But with the House looking to skim off \$330 million to put into general revenues, it suddenly looks an awful lot like a tax increase.

The Florida Department of Transportation testified before a House subcommittee last week that the loss of \$330 million would have an impact of \$500 million to \$900 million on current and future projects. The U.S. Department of Transportation says every \$1 billion invested by state governments in highway construction and maintenance creates 28,000 jobs. Just in Leon County, road construction company C.W. Roberts Contracting Inc. employs 209 people, and owner Chuck Roberts is struggling to keep the company together and avoid laying off people. So do the math: While Gov. Rick Scott is preaching "Let's Get to Work" and vowing to create 700,000 jobs in seven years, and the unemployment rate remains unacceptably high, the House is willing to put as many as 25,000 jobs at risk.

The user fees work. The Transportation Trust Fund works. The projects it funds put people to work. Is there a problem?

Keep the greedy uncle away from the Transportation Trust Fund and let it do what it was created to do.