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ECONOMY BLAMED ON GOP

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Text:

Florida **Democrats** kicked off the legislative session by attacking Republicans over the bad economy, not considering some **tax** increases and slashing the budget.

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TALLAHASSEE -- With their numbers and clout growing as the economy shrinks, Democratic legislators began the 60-day legislative session on the offensive Tuesday, bashing the Republicans who run the Legislature for mismanaging the economy, the state budget and Florida's future.

The **Democrats'** attack, coming hours before the Senate president and House speaker even officially rang in the session, foreshadows an election year in which they're ready to stick together to remind the press and public at every turn that Republicans are in charge and are now responsible for the \$540 million in budget cuts that are about to be voted on next week.

Senate Democratic leader Steve Geller of Cooper City said **Democrats** in the House and Senate will likely vote against this round of budget cuts as well as next year's budget, which will have to be trimmed by at least \$2 billion by the end of the session in 60 days. "It's not fat that they're cutting," Geller said. "We're now breaking the bones and trying to eat the marrow."

Strengthening the **Democrats'** election-year hand: a pick-up of nine seats in the Republican-dominated House over the past two years, including one in a Republican district just last week. House **Democrats** now control 42 seats -- and will likely pick up one more -- to the Republicans' 77, an edge that allows them to block procedural votes and constitutional amendments.

STRONG PUSH

In the Senate, **Democrats** control just 14 of 40 seats, but are making a strong push to unseat next year's designated Republican Senate president, Jeff Atwater of North Palm Beach, in the November election.

Meantime, Republicans are already on the defensive in Florida as the economy falters. And the GOP itself in the Legislature is split between the more moderate and bipartisan Senate and the sharply conservative House.

The House leadership is often at ideological odds with moderate Republican Gov. Charlie Crist, who has wooed **Democrats** and provided them unprecedented access since his 2006 election.

But that will only go so far.

The **Democrats**, who want to define Republicans as close-minded and heartless as they press for budget cuts in education and healthcare, are nevertheless walking a fine line in their attacks. In their Tuesday morning press conference, they said they wanted a

"discussion" about adding more "revenues" to the state budget by closing sales and corporate-income **tax** "loopholes."

To Republicans, that means **Democrats** want to raise **taxes**.

"No matter what they want to call it -- **tax** fairness, closing loopholes, attacking special interests -- the only solution they are providing for Florida's future is **tax** increases," Rep. Adam Hasner, the Republican leader from Delray Beach, said in a written statement.

House Democratic Leader Dan Gelber of Miami Beach repeatedly said that's an example of the "automatic reflex" of the "right-wing orthodoxy" in the Florida House.

Gelber's proposal: Make multistate corporations pay corporate income **taxes** they can now avoid through a complicated accounting system that allows them to hide Florida income in out-of-state corporations they own.

Gelber said the state loses about \$400 million yearly this way so that companies like Wal-Mart can escape corporate **taxes**, while regular Florida companies pay them.

Other Democratic **plans** include raising state sales **taxes** on those who don't pay them -- whether it's on ostrich feed or newspaper ads -- or slap an extra \$1 **tax** on cigarette packs.

'RAINY DAY' MONEY

Like Crist, the **Democrats** are also pushing to use so-called "rainy day" savings money to plug budget holes, while Republican legislators are resisting.

But even worse, Republicans say, is the push to increase **taxes** because it will make the economy worse.

"In trying economic times, I don't think the right thing to do is raise **taxes**," said Rep. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, a Miami Republican.

"Anybody you raise **taxes** on will pass them on to their customers."