Florida budget writers get $2B surprise
By Matt Dixon
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Florida lawmakers on Tuesday just got a $2 billion present.

Ahead of final budget negotiations, state economists say Florida will bring in $2 billion more in general revenue than previously anticipated in December, the last time they projected general revenue for the current and next fiscal years.
That includes a boost to current year revenues by $1.4 billion, and an increase to next fiscal year's forecast by $550.8 over the next fiscal year. The combined two-year total, which is money lawmakers can use as they finalize next year's budget, is just over $2 billion more than revenue estimators previously forecast.

The new revenue estimate is the continuation of a rapid transformation of the budget environment with which lawmakers were facing. Headed into the March start of the 2021 legislative session, lawmakers were staring down a $2.7 billion budget gap. But with new revenue projections on top of an estimated $10 billion the state is set to receive in federal Covid-19 stimulus money, the state is now awash in funds.

Legislative leaders have long known they would get a $10 billion infusion of federal pandemic stimulus aid. But because it is a one-time influx of money, they have been careful, a sentiment Senate President Wilton Simpson continued in response to the new revenue forecast.

"While encouraging, there is still reason to be cautious," he said in a statement. "We know estimates can, and often do, change without much notice."

The House provided a vague outline of how it would like to spend federal pandemic cash in its proposed budget, but the Senate has not yet said how it intends to spend the money.

By the numbers: *The new forecast revised upward sales tax collections by $1.2 billion over the current and next fiscal year, by far the biggest adjustment from December forecasts.*

"Even though signs of a return to pre-pandemic life are firmly in place, the Conference noted the future risk to sales tax collections associated with people returning to a normal purchasing mix of goods and services, as well as a more typical savings rate," read a summary released with the revised estimates.

Simpson gave Gov. Ron DeSantis a big slice of the credit because he did not institute pandemic shutdowns as strictly as other states. DeSantis pushed to reopen Florida's economy earlier than many other states, which politically energized his base — and the state's economy — but left him open to criticism as the state at times served as the nation's hot spot for coronavirus spread.