

STATE CAPITOL BRIEFS – MONDAY, APRIL 14, 2009
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

SUBSCRIBERS,
RE-SENDING to subscribers who didn't receive the Monday evening briefs package

LEGISLATIVE BRIEFS

REMODELED INTERIOR DESIGN REGS CLEAR HOUSE PANEL

A bill that would remove office designs and commercial kitchen layouts from interior design regulations drew approval from the House Government Operations Appropriations Committee Monday. The bill (HB 1303), sponsored by Rep. Baxter Troutman, R-Winter Haven, would change the legal definition of interior design in the statutes to exclude designs created for the sale of or installation of cubicle workstations and commercial food service equipment. The measure was supported Monday by several business organizations, who said the current regulations provided unnecessary burdens to commerce in the state. However, the bill was opposed by interior designers, who argued that the current regulations prevent safety hazards in work places. "The fact of the matter, when the Florida Legislature (first) took this issue up, it was in response to a state of crisis, fires, disasters that had occurred inside of Florida and outside of Florida where people died," said Ron Book, a lobbyist for the Interior Design Association of Florida. But backers of the bill countered that the design laws were too strict. "The interior design cartel has convinced a prior Legislature to give the interior designers control over everything that goes inside of a commercial building," said Jerry Pierce, CEO of Restaurant Equipment World, Inc. in Orlando. "The design cartel talks about life safety issues, which are important, but many of these are very basic items that are covered by no end of other people." The bill, which was narrowly approved with a 4-3 vote, has one more stop in the House before it is ready for a vote of the full chamber. Reps. Oscar Braynon, D-Miami Gardens, Charles McBurney, R-Jacksonville, and Alan Williams, D-Tallahassee, voted against the bill, which does not yet have a companion in the Senate.

RACHEL HOFFMAN BILL PASSES ANOTHER TEST

The House version of a measure designed to protect confidential informants passed the House Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations Committee Monday. The proposal (HB 1535), spurred by the death of Florida State graduate Rachel Hoffman, has also gotten the go ahead from several Senate committees as well. Both measures would force law enforcement agencies to lay out specific procedures for confidential informants. Hoffman's parents have been pushing for a more stringent law that would require police officers to tell potential informants about their right to counsel, and prohibit non violent offenders or offenders in drug treatment programs from serving as informants. "Any one of them and my daughter would still be alive," said Margie Weiss, Hoffman's mother. The bill is

scheduled for one more committee stop before it could head to the floor.

CHRISTIAN COALITION BACKING EMBRYONIC STEM CELL FUNDING BAN
The Christian Coalition is urging its members to tell lawmakers to keep proviso language in the budget that would ban the use of state money to fund embryonic stem cell research. Rep. David Rivera, R-Miami, included the language in the budget, barring state money going to universities and university-related research centers from using any of that money to pay for embryonic stem cell research. "What kind of value system do we have when we will protect turtle eggs but have such a low regard for the human embryo, especially when funding embryonic stem cell research draws funds away from adult stem cell research where results have been far more promising?" Dennis Baxley, Executive Director of Christian Coalition of Florida, said in a statement sent to its members. Baxley and other embryonic stem cell opponents have in recent years cited promising research in adult stem cells as a viable alternative to the more controversial procedure using embryos. The ban on state money for embryonic research isn't in the Senate budget.

HOW MANY STUDENTS?

Projected school enrollment for Florida hasn't changed much since the Economic and Demographic Research Office's last meeting in February, increasing only by 71.56 students. However, enrollment in the state's public education system is taking a dive from this past year. The latest calculation for the 2008-2009 school year, put enrollment at 2,618,006. The numbers released Monday put next school year's enrollment at 2,608,006, a decrease of 10,000. The state Legislature uses these numbers to determine how much money schools should receive in state dollars.

POLITICAL BRIEFS

MEEK SNARES ANOTHER UNION ENDORSEMENT: While some of the biggest names in Florida politics are still pondering the 2010 U.S. Senate race, or have already passed on it, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek is continuing his active pursuit of the seat. Meek, a Miami Democrat running to replace retiring Sen. Mel Martinez, picked up another union endorsement Monday, winning the backing of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union, his campaign announced. While traveling the state seeking signatures for qualifying position, Meek rallied with union members in Hallandale Beach, where he hailed the union's membership. "The men and women of AFSCME represent the fabric of Florida by mentoring our children, supporting our university students, implementing critical government programs, and treating our family members in hospitals," Meek said in a statement. AFSCME International President Gerald W. McEntee returned the favor, explaining why the union, which traditionally backs Democrats, is choosing sides so early in the primary that will at least include Meek and state Sen. Dan Gelber. "Throughout his tenure in Congress, Rep. Meek has stood solidly with the members of AFSCME on a variety of important issues, from raising the minimum wage to increasing our nation's

investment in children's health care," McEntee said. "He has been there for working people in Florida and throughout our nation, and we know we can count on his continued advocacy and dedication when he is elected to the Senate." Meek has collected several union endorsements and held fundraising events with former President Bill Clinton.

OTHER GOVERNMENT BRIEFS

CAT FUND'S FISCAL FUTURE UP FOR DEBATE AT CABINET

The Florida Hurricane Catastrophe Fund has been trying to find financial backup for the 2009 hurricane season, but there may be no backup to be had. "No financial products appear to meet the FHCF's cost and capacity parameters at this time..." wrote financial advisers from Raymond James & Associates, Inc. to SBA Executive Director Ash Williams and CAT Fund Director Jack Nicholson in a memo. The CAT fund has been working to identify potential funding sources for the 2009 hurricane season since October, when advisers told the SBA that in a worst case scenario, the fund would experience a shortfall of up to \$18 billion. Last week, Sen. Bill Nelson's office confirmed that the U.S. Treasury would not extend a line of credit to the state to back up the fund. Nelson is now pushing for a federal loan guarantee for the fund. The SBA will be discussing the fund's financial challenges at the Cabinet meeting Tuesday morning. The agenda item is simply listed as: Request authorization for the Florida Hurricane Catastrophe Fund (FHCF) to purchase financial product(s) in order to enhance the ability of the FHCF to respond to participating insurers' losses for the 2009/2010 reimbursement contract year.

GROUP FILES SUIT AGAINST EPA

Frustrated over a lack of action, a group of environmental organizations has filed suit in Tallahassee to force the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to review the Florida's oversight of the federal Clean Water Act. Saying the state has failed to adequately protect state waters despite two previous lawsuit wins over the past six years, the Clean Water Network filed suit in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Florida in Tallahassee. The suit, filed April 8, calls on EPA to conduct an independent review of Florida's water quality data from 2003 through the present, and decide which waters need stricter pollution limits. The group contends the state Department of Environmental Protection is still not in compliance. The network is planning to file another lawsuit later this week calling on EPA to reject the state's new imperiled waters rule. "Ultimately, the EPA is responsible for enforcing the Clean Water Act," said Linda Young of the Clean Water Network. "The DEP has kept doing what they were doing and the EPA just seems to look the other way."

--END--

4/13/2009

Illuminating the Sunshine State

<http://www.newsserviceflorida.com>