

Early session budget cuts will total at least \$200 million to \$300 million

Sen. **Lisa Carlton**, chairman of the Senate Fiscal Policy and Calendar Committee, said Wednesday that the Florida Senate will work with the House to slash spending in this year's budget by as much as \$200 million to \$300 million during the first few days of the 2008 session.

Carlton was not sure if the Senate planned to go any higher than that, saying that it is so late in the current fiscal year - the state budget covers spending from July 1 to June 30 - that it would be hard to figure out where to make the cuts. Rep. **Ray Sansom**, the House budget chief, said a day earlier that the House was looking at cuts anywhere from \$300 million to \$600 million.

Carlton said the Senate plans to roll out its proposed cuts in late February, while Sansom said the House may not unveil their cut package until the first week of the session, which starts Mar. 4.

Of course, this next round of budget cuts will be followed by work on a 2008-09 budget. The House has signaled its unwillingness to follow the lead of Gov. Charlie Crist, who used reserves and trust funds as a one year gap instead of deep budget cuts. Carlton on Wednesday emphasized again and again that the Senate was not ruling out any options, whether its "user fees" or sweeping some trust accounts. "Maintaining a sense of flexibility is important," said Carlton.

One place that the Senate will likely follow Crist: Use of increased local property taxes to pay for schools. Carlton, noting that the Legislature has routinely used growth to pay for education, said "it would be very challenging to fund the education budget without those growth dollars."