

Crist signs bill on tuition increase

The Associated Press

Florida's state universities will be able to increase tuition rates up to 15 percent annually until they reach the national average under a new law Gov. Charlie Crist signed Monday.

Crist also signed laws that will strengthen the financing of a school voucher program, draw down another \$400 million in federal stimulus money for unemployment compensation and make human trafficking a state crime.

The governor, though, vetoed a bill that would have delayed a requirement to install fire sprinklers in condominium common areas from 2014 to 2025.

Crist, university officials and the Florida Student Association supported the tuition bill (SB 762), saying rates that now are among the nation's lowest must go up to improve quality, help pay for need-based scholarships and stop a brain drain of faculty to other states that pay better.

The 15 percent maximum includes across-the-board tuition increases ordered by the Legislature. This year, lawmakers have approved an 8 percent statewide increase. Each of the 11 public universities now can add a differential of 7 percent.

The 8 percent increase will boost tuition for a student taking the average 30 credit hours in a year by \$197 for a total of \$2,658. At 15 percent, the increase would be \$369 for a \$2,830 total.

The national average is \$6,585 — more than twice Florida's tui-

tion even with a full 15 percent increase this year.

The new law replaces one that gives only the five largest universities authority to go up by 15 percent annually but with a total cap of 40 percent — still well below the national average.

The voucher law (HB 453) will give insurance companies a dollar-for-dollar credit against their premium taxes for donations they make to a program that sends low-income children to private schools. The tax credit program now is supported only through corporate income tax credits and those will continue.

The program also will retain its present cap of \$118 million a year. With only corporate tax credits the program has fallen well short of that maximum, spending \$73.5 million in the last school year on about 23,000 students.

“Extending tax credits to insurance premium taxes increases the number of corporate citizens eligible to participate through charitable contributions, ensuring the program's sustainability in challenging economic times,” said Patricia Lavesque, executive director of former Gov. Jeb Bush's Foundation for Florida's Future.

Critics argue the program diverts dollars from public to private schools. Supporters say it saves the state money because the vouchers pay only \$3,950 compared to \$6,873 that'll be spent on each student in public schools in the next budget year.

The stimulus bill (SB 810) will

give up to 250,000 jobless Floridians as much as 20 extra weeks of extra unemployment compensation. The money to extend a 59-week cap on compensation will come from stimulus aid intended for states with high unemployment rates. Florida's jobless figure was 9.6 percent in April.

Lawmakers, though, rejected another \$444 million in stimulus for the state's jobless program because of strings attached to the money. One requirement would have been to cover people who leave their jobs to escape from domestic violence or to accompany a spouse being relocated.

The human trafficking law (SB 168) will let state and local law enforcement officers arrest suspects they encounter bringing illegal immigrants into the country, often at sea. In the past, many such suspects have gotten away before federal authorities could arrive to make arrests.

In his veto message on the condominium bill (HB 391) Crist noted that his predecessor, Bush, also withheld approval from a similar measure in 2006.

“I am sensitive to the costs associated with installing the fire sprinkler systems, especially in these challenging economic times,” Crist wrote. “However, in the event of a fire, public safety for the residents and for the firefighters and emergency medical personnel who lay their lives on the line to provide services greatly outweigh all other considerations.”