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Crist goes West for politics and energy meeting in Utah

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DATELINE: TALLAHASSEE

Hours after he proposed cutting \$1 billion to balance the state's budget, Gov. Charlie Crist was expected to fly to a California resort for a political meeting and will later meet with Robert Redford to talk about global warming in Sundance, Utah.

The state is not paying for the political trip. Crist is expected to speak to the California Republican Party convention at the Renaissance Esmeralda Resort and Spa in Indian Wells. An invitation at the California party's Web site makes the trip sound pretty appetizing: "Savor delicious cuisine to tempt your palate. Soak up the sun, stretch out on a sandy beach or swim under a waterfall ... Enjoy the serenity of the desert through the breathtaking Aerial Tramway or a hot-air balloon ride ... the choice is yours."

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger joined Crist at this summer's climate change summit in Miami, where Crist announced a push to reduce greenhouse gases.

Energy will be the topic of conversation as Crist plans to attend the opening of the Sundance Summit on climate protection this weekend. The three-day meeting, which will draw the participation of 60 mayors from across the country, is hosted by Redford, Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. No Florida mayors are scheduled to attend.

Crist described the gathering as "good stuff." He is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at a dinner tonight.

Crist, though, will likely strike a different tone in his remarks than one of last year's speakers. Former U.S. Sen. Gary Hart, D-Colo., used the event to denounce the Iraq war as "immoral," arguing the country was "trading lives for oil" in the conflict.

Grass-roots campaign

Democrat Suzan Franks will hope for a better result next year when she takes on Republican Sen. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness.

Just a few months ago, Franks lost to Dean by a 2-1 ratio in the Senate district that stretches from southern Citrus County through Marion County to the Georgia border north of Gainesville.

That was a special election to replace Sen. Nancy Argenziano, R-Dunnellon, who was appointed by Crist to the state's utilities regulatory commission.

Franks said Thursday she'll try again.

"It was a wonderful experience running in the special election," Franks said in a statement. "In the June special election, time and money were against me. Fortunately, this time I now have fourteen months to compete. I will travel the district, running a traditional, grass-roots campaign, to get my message directly to the voters."

Running a "traditional grass-roots campaign" is political shorthand for "my opponent will have a lot more money than I will."

Franks raised about \$13,000 for this year's campaign, compared with about \$500,000 for Dean, who had a spirited battle with former state Rep. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, in the Republican primary.

An idea worth mulling?

Crist floated the idea last week of selling the state's lottery and/or some of its roads to private companies.

But Crist did not bring up the idea with the state's agencies or others. He said he was introducing the idea for the first time with reporters who talked with him at the Governor's Mansion on Monday morning.

"You're the first ones I'm vetting it with," said Crist, who repeatedly said privatizing the lottery or some highways was "merely an idea. It's not something I'm promoting."

Some states have privatized toll roads to gain the immediate cash payment from private companies that then operate and maintain the roads.

The downside is the loss of recurring revenue in the future.

This year, Crist signed a new law that gives the state the option of offering long-term leases to private companies to operate state toll facilities like Alligator Alley or the Sunshine Skyway Bridge.

"What I understand is that sometimes there are those in private industry who will give you significant up-front dollars, in the billions, for a lottery or a road," he said.

"These are ideas. You got to keep thinking ... I don't know if it's good or bad at this point."

But by the end of the week, Crist wasn't enamored enough with the proposals to include them in his plan to offset the state's \$1 billion budget deficit.

Compiled from reports by Joe Follick and Lloyd Dunkelberger of the H-T Capital Bureau.