

December 2006 & January 2007

Crist is Governor

On November 7th after the most expensive campaign in state history, Charlie Crist was elected as the new Governor of Florida. As a Republican, the first time in Florida that a Republican has followed another into office, we do not expect a revolution. But who is the man, and what does he stand for? More importantly for us, how will we fare under his Governorship? Crist's grandfather arrived in America from Cyprus nearly 100 years ago. He settled, shining shoes, before developing his own small business, and raised 7 children. Crist's father became a Doctor and moved to Florida to raise his 4 children. Crist himself was born in 1956 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, but grew up in St Petersburg. Crist was class president at St Petersburg High School, and later was student body vice president at Florida State University. He earned his law degree at the Cumberland School of Law in Birmingham, Alabama. An internship in the State Attorney's Office, a position as general council for the minor league division of the Baseball Commissioner's Office and then state director for U.S. Senator Connie Mack followed before he returned to Tampa and private practice. In 1992 he won a seat in the Florida Senate where he served as Chairman of the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee and as Chairman of the Appropriations Criminal Justice Subcommittee. During his six years of Senate service he sponsored, amongst other legislation, the Stop Turning Out Prisoners (STOP) bill requiring prisoners to serve at least 85% of their sentences. This earned him an appointment as an Honary Sherriff by the Florida Sheriffs' Association – the third person to receive this accolade. Following his stint in Senate, Gov. Bush appointed Crist as Deputy Secretary of the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation. In 2000 Crist became the last elected Commissioner of Education before successfully seeking election as Attorney General in 2002 – Florida's first elected Republican Attorney General. Here he has remained, until November 7th made his upward rise complete. On page 8 we examine his stated policies for Government.

Cape Canaveral Bans STR's

According to an ordinance passed on 21st November by the city council of Cape Canaveral all new short term rentals will be banned. Existing STR's and those licensed in the next three months will be allowed to continue. Arguments raged for over three hours between residents and owners before the council gave the ordinance tentative approval. There will be a second vote on Dec 5th. About half of the 5,939 homes in Cape Canaveral are occupied by renters, however there are no figures for STR's. The action has been taken following complaints from residents regarding late-night noise from tourists, vehicles parked near homes, trash and loss of a sense of neighbourhood. However Tim Lavensaler, who owns 4 STR units, submitted a draft set of rules and regulations that he claimed he and other STR owners would be willing to obey and felt there should be some trial of rules before laws are changed.

Snow Shoes not Sandals?

During a rather brisk cold snap in Florida just before the Thanksgiving holiday, a few flakes of snow were mixed with the rain on 21st November. Temperatures had dipped to 40 degrees and this lasted to Thanksgiving. This was the first snow in Florida since 2003 when a few flakes fell in Broward and Volusia counties.

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Florida Homes and Travel

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Seasons Greetings

Welcome to the combined December and January issue of Florida Homes And Travel. The eagle-eyed among you may notice that the newsletter is now sporting a rather fetching saddle stitch (technical name for a staple I believe)! We have acquired a new copier with 'finishing' capabilities, which prints, stitches and folds your issue all on its own direct from the computer! We don't know ourselves in the office, and if we could persuade it to make the tea, then Tim would be redundant!

Looking forward to next year, we shall be sending out your survey forms with the February issue ready to gather your opinions for the 2007 Annual Property Management Survey. We know from your feedback just how useful this survey is to owners, and we have once again fine-tuned a few questions in response to last year's form. So if you are gathering together your facts and figures for the year's accounts, please keep them handy for the survey.

We thank you for your continued support this year; we look forward to bringing you all the news next year, and wish you a Very Merry Christmas and Prosperous New Year.

Elle & Tim

Money Corp Dollar Update:

In the middle of November it recovered from an uncomfortable situation at \$1.9150 and pulled back three cents. It was not to last. On Friday 17th the Dollar began a downward spiral that carried through Thanksgiving. The holiday itself was the main culprit. On the previous day, investors and traders began to square off their long Dollar positions, pushing the Pound a cent and a half higher. On the Friday, that clear-out was repeated, taking the Pound to a \$1.94 high early on Monday morning. On the bright side, that mayhem is unlikely to be repeated this year. To be

pessimistic, the Dollar exodus will almost certainly not be reversed; miracles like that only happen in the movies.

Miami Beach Climate Data –December - 1948- 2003 (All in degrees Fahrenheit)

The average high temp is	75.4°
The average low temp is	64.9°
The highest temp (on December 20 th 1948)	86°
The coldest night temp (on December 24 th 1989)	32°

Average Mortgage Rates

With zero points	Sept	Oct	Nov
Fixed 30 yrs	6.52%	6.65%	6.41%
Adjustable 1 yr	6.44%	6.38%	6.29%

Note: Mortgage rates are published as a service to readers to indicate trends and must not be relied on in entering into any agreement.

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Letters

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Florida Homes and Travel

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News Roundup

Orlando International Airport has gained new recognition beyond being the busiest airport in Florida. It has been named by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine as the healthiest airport in the country. The survey found that 97% of restaurants at OIA serve at least one healthy entrée.

Perhaps more usefully, OIA has introduced an Express pick up for E-Pass and SunPass customers. Drivers have access to specially marked entrances to the inner curb of the main terminal to pick up passengers. The Express Pick Up is accessed from the "B" side departing flights curb where they will be security checked, and then can park for 30 minutes for a charge of \$1 while they meet their passengers.

Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport reported a 9.5% rise in passenger traffic in October 2006 over October 2005. October volume rose to 1.5 million passengers.

US Airways has launched an \$8 billion hostile takeover bid for Delta Air Lines. Delta has said it will review the proposal, but will continue moving forward with its plans to exit Bankruptcy protection as a stand alone company next year. Delta Air Lines incurred the wrath of nursing mothers after a flight attendant removed a passenger who was breastfeeding her baby before take off. The attendant allegedly offered the mother a blanket to cover the baby's head and told her "you are offending me". When the mother refused to cover her baby, she was ejected from the flight. Delta say they have reprimanded the attendant and said "Delta fully supports a woman's right to breastfeed her baby on board our aircraft". This was not enough to prevent a "nurse-in" by mothers at more than 30 airports nationwide in front of Delta check-in desks.

Winn-Dixie Stores Inc plan for reorganisation following 20 months in Bankruptcy protection has been approved by a bankruptcy judge and should see the company emerge from Chapter 11 protection by early December.

The Florida Lottery has unveiled it's special raffle which will create 10 millionaires on New Year's Day. Titled Holiday Millionaire Raffle, tickets are limited (half already gone) and cost \$20. As well as the top 10 prizes there are 20 prizes of \$100,000 and 100 prizes of \$10,000. The odds of scooping \$1 million are 1 in 250,000, the best in the history of the Lottery.

Carnival Cruise Line's Liberty docked in Port Everglades on 19 November after a nightmare cruise in which 700 passengers and crew attended the infirmary, and many more where confined to

their rooms following a nasty outbreak of norovirus causing extreme gastrointestinal distress.



If you have a lovely pink plastic flamingo around your house, or languishing in the garage – it might be worth holding on to. This icon of Florida (and kitsch) is no longer in production as (after 49 years) the plant in Leominster, Mass closed on Nov 1st. Up to 250,000 flamingos were made every year, along with garden gnomes and other plastic products, so it may take a while, but eventually it is bound to become a cult item on ebay!

Look out for new self service kiosks in fast food restaurants in Florida. After noting this story for this issue, we took our two boys for a quick lunch in Burger King, Guildford and found 3 of the machines already installed. Looking rather like large juke boxes, the kiosks take your order using a touch screen, and then you collect your food from a designated counter. KFC is testing 3 kiosks in stores in Florida, and Subway and Macdonald Franchisees are sure to follow.

MyTravel Group has confirmed an approach to rival First Choice over its mainstream operations. MyTravel issued a statement that said "it is in discussions with First Choice Holidays regarding the possible acquisition of First Choice's Mainstream business and certain related operations". The statement added: "The MyTravel Board believes that this is an opportunity which could deliver significant value to both First Choice and MyTravel shareholders given the value of potential synergies and other consolidation benefits".

Average Daily Hotel Room Rate

Area	Oct 05	Oct 06
International Drive	\$96.91	\$101.61
Lake Buena Vista	\$106.34	\$117.31
Kissimmee East	\$73.73	\$79.13
Kissimmee West	\$49.81	\$48.96

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Homes

We have received the following information for Ex-Pats from Kestrel International and pass it on:

On May 25th 2006 in response to the Pensions commissions proposals on pension reform, the UK Government proposed reducing the number of years contributions to qualify for a full UK state pension to 30 years (compared with the current 44 years for men and 39 years for women) for those who retire after April 6th 2010. The pension reform white paper publication states the plan should become Law in the summer of 2007.

How this may affect you:

1) If you already have 30 years of contributions and are still contributing, then you may have already qualified for a full state pension and any overpayment will not be refunded, therefore you should carefully consider ceasing making contributions.

2) You may have paid almost 30 years of contributions and have stopped paying since being in the USA and for a small additional payment; you would qualify for a full state pension.

Kestrel International can assist Brits living in the USA obtain a retirement pension forecast for their state pensions from the Inland Revenue in Newcastle upon Tyne. This part of our service is completely free of charge and there is no financial gain for Kestrel International or ourselves whatsoever. We are simply assisting Brits track down their state pensions and advising them of the new changes which are extremely likely to come in to effect next year. For further information regarding this matter or any other UK pension related matters being either personal or occupational pensions, Please contact Mark Solomons of Kestrel International USA Inc on 561-333-4466 or email questions to ukpensions@adelphia.net whereby he will be happy to assist you

Florida now has the dubious honour of being second in the nation in the number of foreclosures according to ForeclosureS.com, a northern California based real estate investment advisory firm. But, Charlotte, Manatee and Sarasota counties are all bucking the trend with foreclosures down 30% in the third quarter over 2005 figures.

Impact fees for school development continue to trouble builders and developers around the state. In Volusia county the 5th District Court of Appeal has issued a ruling that the Volusia Home Builders association should have sued Volusia County not the Volusia County School Board to challenge an impact fee increase. This is because the fee is set by the County and not the School Board. In Collier County builders want the school impact fee reduced as numbers at schools have reduced. The fee has been increased from \$1,700 to \$10,000, contribution to total fees of \$30,000 per new home – the highest in the state. Manatee County is still reeling from county commissioner's approval of the impact fee increase to \$9005. But school impact fees could increase shortly by 59% for single family homes and 67% for a townhome.

Biometric passports have been long anticipated and issued as standard since August – thus complying with US requirements for staying within the visa waiver program. I have received mine, and there are now about 3 million in circulation. Anyone concerned about the security of the information in these passports may be interested in this article printed on the web following this link <http://www.guardian.co.uk/idcards/story/0,,1950226,00.html>

Watch out for a big campaign by Visit Florida and the Orlando Visitor and Convention Center on UK televisions in the new year. Research by these groups has shown that UK Visits to North America as a whole are down by 8.1% in the first half of 2006, deplanements from UK carriers at Sanford and Orlando are down by 5.2% in the first half, and meantime deplanements in Las Vegas have increased by 40%. Forward bookings from the UK market are 'soft and declining'. The marketing campaigns are planned to show on TV during January and February. Let us hope that villa owners will benefit from the push – make sure your website is ready and fresh.

We have been unable to confirm reports that purchasers of homes on the Tierra Del Sol resort in the Four Corners area are receiving letters requiring that they either pay another \$165,000 for marketing and rental programs offered when they purchased, pursue their own marketing, or receive their deposit back. We would like to hear from any subscribers who have received this letter.

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Florida Homes and Travel

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Polk Taxes rolls show that property value within Polk County has topped \$634 million. This is a leap of 21% over the previous year. The increase this year reflects an increase of appraised values across county even though rates imposed by various taxing authorities have decreased. The end result is still higher property tax bills. Annual property tax notices have now been mailed and should have been received.

Third Quarter Home Prices

During the third quarter the Florida housing market continued to mirror the national trend of higher inventory levels of homes available for sale in many markets, and a slowdown in sales according to figures released by the *Florida Association of Realtors*. We don't have space here to show you the realtor sales for the same areas as shown below, but without exclusion, all areas showed a decrease in sales over third quarter 2005, from as little as 11% in Tallahassee to 49% in West Palm Beach and 45% in Naples. Statewide, sales decreased by 34% over third quarter 2005.

The Statewide median price remains virtually unchanged from \$247,800 last year. In third quarter 2001 the statewide median was \$132,000 which is an increase of 87.8% over the five year period.

Industry experts are really caught in a dilemma over which way things will go in the near future because of conflicting elements which contribute to the overall market. One the one hand there is a back log of inventory depressing prices. This could put off buyers who want to wait for even lower prices, or it could stimulate sales by those who wish to take advantage of the lowest mortgage rate since January. There is also speculation that the Federal Reserve could cut rates in the months ahead if inflation is under control and the economy flags.

To gain insight into current trends in Florida's real estate industry the University of Florida's Center for Real Estate Studies recently conducted a new statewide quarterly survey of industry executives, market research economists, real estate scholars and other experts. The threat of spiralling insurance rates was mentioned as the biggest concern, followed by the softening housing market as the second most mentioned trend.

However, Dr Wayne Archer, director of UF's Center for Real Estate Studies believes that Florida will be less affected by a sharp downturn in the housing market because of the insulating effect of its high population growth rate.

However, the slowdown in the real estate market has reduced the amount of Dollars for next year's state budget. Lawmakers will have approximately \$466 million less than economists had forecast. The reduction comes from documentary stamps paid on all real estate transactions. However, Crist says he will need just \$700 million for his priorities, less than the \$2.3 billion in additional revenue still expected.

The chart below shows the *percentage change* this quarter from the third quarter last year. The MSA's in bold (all but 2) show which area's *median price* has decreased since the second quarter 2006. As you can see, only Miami and Tampa/St Pete/Clearwater have shown increases in median prices since last quarter, and these were by nominal amounts. Remember, these figures are for existing single-family homes, not new-builds.

District (MSA)	Median Price 2006-2005	%Change
Daytona Beach	\$213,700	-4%
Fort Lauderdale	\$371,100	-3%
Fort Myers/Cape Coral	\$263,400	-8%
Fort Pierce/Port St Lucie	\$252,000	-6%
Fort Walton Beach	\$235,000	-6%
Lakeland/Winter Haven	\$176,200	+8%
Melbourne/Titusville	\$215,500	-9%
Miami	\$377,700	+4%
Naples	\$459,600	-7%
Orlando	\$264,200	+6%
Panama City	\$211,600	-5%
Pensacola	\$168,800	-1%
Punta Gorda	\$216,500	-5%
Sarasota/Bradenton	\$302,900	-11%
Tampa/St Pete/Clearwater	\$234,000	+8%
West Palm Bch/Boca Raton	\$380,900	-5%
Statewide	\$247,900	0%

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Florida Homes and Travel

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Coastal Gazette

Village Inn Restaurants have opened a new restaurant at 10740 State Road 54 (Ducksloough & SR 54) in New Port Richey, taking the number of Village Inn's in Florida to 33. This latest addition seats approximately 156 guests and takes on a new modern Village Inn look. The 'anytime' menu includes classic breakfasts along with signature items such as Skillet, Crepes, 3-egg Omelettes and made-from-scratch Buttermilk Pancakes. Village Inn also serves The Best Pie in America® and a bottomless cup of coffee.

RBC Centura bank has opened a new branch in Bradenton. The bank is a subsidiary of the Royal Bank of Canada and this is the fourth branch in Bradenton. The new branch is located at 9105 Town Center Parkway in Lakewood Ranch.

Collier County has benefited from a year long aggressive marketing campaign in Miami and Fort Lauderdale according to Jack Wert of the Collier County Convention and Visitors Bureau. Wert tracks visitor numbers and says the third quarter of 2006 saw an eleven percent increase over last year.

Judge S.S. Jolley Bridge, connecting Marco Island to the mainland, was shut for an hour and a half on Thanksgiving holding up tourists and residents alike. The bridge, which apparently never closes – even in a hurricane -, was blocked when a Dodge Viper being driven by an island resident smashed in to a Ford Ranger pick up truck.

You may be saying goodbye to that glass of complimentary water with your meal if other cities follow the example set in Tamarac, near Fort Lauderdale. To preserve water, the city has asked restaurants to hold back on the water, unless it is

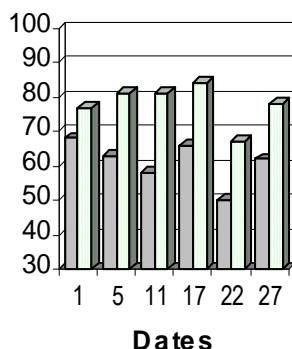
specifically requested. It is not so much the glass of water that is the problem, it is the gallons of water required to wash up all the glasses that have probably not even been touched.

Collier County has now made red tide warnings available by email so you can plan for your day at the beach. To sign up for Collier County's red tide alerts direct to your inbox, go to www.colliergov.net, click on the E-Notices link at the top of the page and follow the instructions. The county's red tide hotline is 239-732-2591.

The Attorney General (and new Governor) Charlie Crist has sued a South Florida pool cleaning company, alleging the company improperly billed customers more than \$170,000 in cleaning fees after Hurricanes Francis and Jeanne in 2004. Pool Companies, Inc. also placed improper liens on consumers' homes if the additional fee was not paid. Crist's office began investigating the company in January 2005 after receiving complaints from South Florida consumers. The company, which does business as Caribbean Pool Service and Repair, charged every one of its customers a "hurricane cleanup charge" without first obtaining the customers' consent. Several customers complained that they had cleaned their own pool after the storm, but were charged the cleanup fee anyway. Anyone who did not pay the charge was either threatened with a mechanic's lien or actually had a lien placed on their home. Investigators estimated that 1,700 consumers in Florida were affected by the improper billing.

"Improperly billing for services is bad enough," said Crist. "Putting a dubious claim on a citizen's most important possession is outrageous and must be stopped immediately."

**November Orlando
High/Low Temperatures**



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Florida Homes and Travel

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Insurance Issues

Citizens Property Insurance Corp is looking at increasing rates again. First up is another special assessment of all homeowner insurance policies. Homeowners have already faced an assessment of 7%, in January all renewals will see a 2.5% assessment to go towards the huge \$1.7 billion deficit from damage in the 2005 hurricane season. The previous (7%) assessment was for damage from the 2004 season. You may remember that the legislature sent a Cheque for \$715 million to reduce the amount of this second assessment – without that Cheque homeowners would be looking at an 11% charge, and remember, these assessments are for all insured homeowners, not just Citizens policy holders. These 2 assessments are still not enough to pay the deficit, and there will be a further charge taken, but it will be much smaller and spread over the next 10 years.

Separately, policy holders with Citizens are looking at further premium increases from March 1 2007. Following the law passed in the final hours of this year's legislative session Citizens is considering increases of as much as 56% on wind-storm only policies. This is because the law required that Citizens purchase reinsurance and pass on that cost in a realist rate. Citizens does not normally purchase reinsurance, and with rates currently so high it is not considered a good bargain. So, if the letter of the law is followed at a meeting on December 7th, windstorm only policy holders face the 55.8% increase, while multi-peril policy holders face 8.5% on homes and 27.6% on condominiums. However, Bruce Douglas, Chairman of Citizens has said he wishes to block the rate hike by recommending that the board ask the state to eliminate the need for reinsurance. His move may buy a little time before the implementation date of 1st March, by which time the issue may be examined again at a special session of the legislature which there are strong indications will be called in January under the new Governorship of Charlie Crist.

Reform Committee

The Property and Casualty Reform Committee set up by outgoing Governor Bush in June, tasked with examining why insurance rates have/are rocketing so much, and to come up with proposals for easing the hikes, produced its recommendations in November as requested. The results really need a special session of the legislature to look at them, and this will most likely now happen in January as stated above rather than December as previously thought. It makes much more sense to hold the session with the new Governor rather than the outgoing one!

Among the many proposals for reducing premiums are:

Allowing insurance companies to offer low-cost policies with reduced coverage, e.g. excluding wind coverage, or for only partial value of the home.

Upgrading homes to increase discounts.

Requiring catastrophe modeling companies to reflect the number and strength of new homes built to new codes, and those upgraded, when providing information to companies setting their rates.

Among the reasons given for the increasing rates:

Increase in property value has a knock on to higher insurance costs.

Costs of building materials and labour, and therefore rebuilding, have risen dramatically.

The cost of reinsurance has increased.

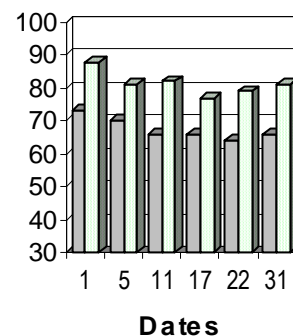
Insurance companies have depleted reserves during the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, and are required by law to maintain these at a certain level.

Florida Lottery Winning Numbers

Date	Numbers
11/25/2006	10 - 11 - 12 - 35 - 41 - 52
11/22/2006	21 - 31 - 45 - 47 - 48 - 52
11/18/2006	05 - 11 - 28 - 37 - 39 - 48
11/15/2006	06 - 12 - 13 - 34 - 42 - 52
11/11/2006	15 - 29 - 40 - 50 - 52 - 53
11/08/2006	23 - 24 - 28 - 32 - 33 - 39
11/04/2006	05 - 07 - 23 - 24 - 36 - 48
11/01/2006	01 - 24 - 28 - 34 - 49 - 51

Numbers are obtained from the Florida Lottery (www.flalottery.com) as a service to readers. We cannot accept liability for any errors.

November Miami High/Low Temperatures





Florida Homes and Travel

December 2006 & January 2007

Governor Charlie Crist

Here we look with a little closer detail at some of the policy pledges that Crist has made during his campaign, and how they may affect us as vacation home owners.

Property Insurance: This is his self declared No 1 issue.

During the campaign, we had rather wish-washy promises, such as requiring insurers to provide home inspections to help homeowners know what they need to do to hurricane-proof their home; A Wipe Your Blues Away Campaign to provide Floridians with financial incentives to undertake such measures to reduce the need for 'Blue Tarps' in the event of a hurricane; credits and discounts on policies; requiring 'report cards' of insurers to provide consumers with information on how efficient and helpful a company is, and giving builders incentives to build houses beyond current codes. All worthy ideas, but what most homeowners want is a halt on the constant upward spiral of insurance premiums.

Since his election Crist has been consulting with many of the players in this crisis, including the opinions of the Democratic Party for their ideas on solving the problem.

The campaign plan receiving the most coverage was one to stop insurance companies which write profitable auto insurance in Florida and provide home insurance cover in other states, and force them to either write home insurance in Florida or withdraw from the market there. Also to end the Florida only homeowner's insurance subsidiaries that State Farm, Allstate and Nationwide, amongst others, have created to keep their Florida losses from their national capital.

The Democratic plan that Crist went to South Florida to hear would make the state the insurer for the bulk of the first \$100,000 of hurricane windstorm coverage, with private insurers covering the higher amounts. As most hurricane damage amounts to less than \$100,000, insurers would be more willing to write the rest of the cover – increasing the availability of cover. And as the state would be operating without profit, rates could be cheaper. The flip side of course is that Florida homeowners could have to pay billions in damage if a major hurricane hit.

Crist is likely to wait to see if a special session is called in early December by outgoing Governor Bush to discuss the 50 proposals put forward by his Property Insurance Reform Committee, before coming up with any final plans for the legislature.

Property Taxes: This is another huge issue that very much affects the viability of vacation homes.

Rising property taxes, along with the increase in sales tax caused by construction booms following the hurricane seasons of 2004 & 2005 have swelled the state coffers and budget to \$73.9 billion. According to campaign white papers Crist believes this money belongs to the Floridians who earned it, and has come up with three unequivocal principles for government:

- The Crist Administration will return as much money as possible to the Floridians who earned it.
- The Crist Administration will not support any new taxes or tax increases.
- The Crist Administration will live within its means.

To provide property tax relief requires a 2 pronged approach:

Requiring local governments to run as efficiently as possible, living within their means and returning excess money to those that earned it. This is really our only hope for a lessening of property taxes, if governments are forced to return excess income in the form of lower rates.

The Crist Administration will propose making the homestead exemption portable statewide so that homeowners can take their 3% property tax cap with them. He will also support a constitutional amendment to give counties the option by referendum to double the homestead exemption to \$50,000 with any subsequent increases to the exemption based on the Consumer Price Index. Currently Florida has a 9% sales tax on telecommunication services. Crist will seek to reduce this rate over three years, which will slightly lower phone bills and cable and satellite services.

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Florida Homes and Travel

December 2006 & January 2007

The Island Of Bones

We have traveled back into our archive to revisit a wonderful trip taken by previous editor Keith Harpham and his lovely wife Kathleen probably taken the year before. Join with us over the next few months as we enjoy a trip back in time in every sense...

Expressing our disappointment prompted a couple in the throng to reply, "Aw gee feller, but you should have seen it last night. It was really great. Out of this world. Man, the colours. You tell 'em Doris how it was." Ain't it invariably the case, you travel thousands of miles in order to catch one of the sights you just have to see, and it turns out to be a damp squib. Here we were, footsore and weary, having travelled the length of Duval Street at forced march pace, to experience the Sunset ceremony at Mallory Pier. Waiting along with lord knows how many other tourists, we stood in this crowd, all agog for this much vaunted scenic event. There was one thing for sure. Such was the press of bodies if you had an attack of the vapours, you could not slide gracefully to the floor. "We must be absolutely bonkers" I mutter, as I try to extricate my foot from under the heel of a rather stout lady dressed in a rent-a-tent T-shirt and voluminous and garishly coloured Bermuda shorts. A guess-my-weight machine would have quit trying, and I felt my foot would never be the same again as she jiggled around to get a better view of one of the circus type busking turns that are a feature of Mallory Pier Sunset gatherings. All very wonderful, but its very popularity seems to be spoiling the whole occasion. "Ain't that tourism the world over?" I must have voiced that remark aloud, as my dear wife muttered something to the effect that many more remarks like that, and my chances of winning the local popularity contest would be nil, and I would very probably get run out of town. OK then, no prizes for guessing the location. Yep, you got it in one, Key West. It was like this. You just have to go to Mallory Pier for the Sunset ceremony, people burbled enthusiastically when we mentioned our intended destination. And here we were.

We had nurtured the idea throughout the short grey days of the previous UK winter. We had been intent on seeing if the reality matched the copywriters blurb. For us this particular one did not, but that's the way the cookie crumbles. Homestead had been our first over night stop. It was a case of thus far and no further after the Atlantic crossing. The Virgin flight had been late into Miami. By the time we had floundered around getting lost in those seemingly never ending Miami suburbs, Key Largo seemed a little ambitious, as it was already late. It's a small world. The motel clerk was from a town only 17 miles from our UK home. He was helping out for an uncle and seeing a bit of the States at the same time. Next day saw us early for brekky at the Potlikkers restaurant, on a typical Florida morning. 'Twas good to be back. "My, I do like your cute accent"

was a familiar accompaniment to the meal. Wagons roll, at least as far as the Homestead Visitor Center, for the glossy brochures and useful maps. Tank up, and its down the road and onto US1 South, for Cayo Hueso as the Spanish called it. Early British settlers from the Bahamas anglicised the name given by earlier Spanish explorers. Translated, it means Island of Bones. When the Spanish found the island it was littered with human bones. Apparently the Indian tribes had a battle there, and this local league match was a serious affair. Cayo for the British became Key. Hueso, pronounced Weso became West.

An impecunious Spaniard sold Key West to an American for \$2,000 in 1815, and the island was taken over by the US Government in 1822. The place prospered to such an extent that in 1888 it was the largest city in Florida with a population of 18,000. All trade and communication with Key West was by boat until that millionaire rail magnate, Henry Flagler, decided to build a railroad spanning the gaps between the many islands that make up the Keys with up to 42 bridges. Fifty million dollars later our Henry rode on the first train to Key West on Jan. 22nd 1912. This remained the first and only link with the mainland until an unusually energetic hurricane in 1935 destroyed many rail sections and the island was back to the boats for all trade and commerce. During the Roosevelt era the Overseas highway was constructed in 1938, the road running roughly parallel to Flagler's old railtrack. There was no mains water on the island until a water pipeline was laid from the mainland during World War II by the US Navy. After the war Tourism was to become the main industry for the Keys and Key West. And that is the end of the History lesson. Wake up and we will move on.

Join with us in February as the intrepid explorers experience US Hwy 1.

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Florida Homes and Travel

December 2006 & January 2007

Weird News

Florida Lotto winner Abraham Shakespeare, winner of \$16.9 million, popped along to pick up his win and discovered the Florida Department of Revenue got there first. Under Florida Law, the department has the authority to intercept IRS tax refunds, Lottery winnings, unemployment compensation and workers compensation when child support is in arrears. The sum of \$8,612 for child support and \$505 in court costs was deducted before Shakespeare could collect the rest. He has said he will spend his win on a new house for him and his mother, new cars for him and his current girlfriend, and I am sure he will share the leftovers with his child for Christmas!

A Davenport woman who said she was abducted has been arrested by Polk County Sheriff's. She was reported missing by her babysitter who found the woman's two children sleeping alone at home. A full scale search was launched including sniffer dogs, helicopters and ATV's around the woman's neighbourhood. The woman eventually phoned police from a CVS store in St Petersburg claiming she had been abducted from her open garage that morning. Eventually she confessed that she had gone walk about, and only phoned in when she became concerned about her children. She was charged with filing a false police report, child neglect and contributing to the delinquency of a child.

Rory McGrory, 43, (parents clearly had a sense of humour) was very inspired when he went on the run from Land O' Lakes jail – he ran straight home to New Port Richey. His parents were not home so he helped himself to money, clothes and watched the search for himself on the TV. He was tracked down after reports of sightings came in

near his parent's home, at a nearby soup kitchen, and a call came from one of his parent's neighbours saying he had been to the door. He was found in a Winnebago parked behind the former Italian-American Club at 7222 Washington Street. In fact as deputies went to the door of the R.V. McGrory jumped out of one of the windows into the arms of surrounding officers! Although released from state prison in May, he had been a 'trusty' on kitchen duty in the main jail building since his arrest in October on charges of burglary, grand theft and fleeing to elude. He had used a can cover to cut his way through the canvas wall of a shower facility and then dug under a fence. He will now be held in the main jail rather than the minimum security area from which he had escaped. Lock, stable door and bolted come to mind!

A couple out fishing on Florida Bay, Key Largo, got more than they bargained for when they bumped something in the water. After several hours of fishing with no catches and then feeling a bump, they turned their 23-foot craft to see what it was. It was "a little fat dog" that could barely keep its head above water. They dragged the fat Cairn terrier on board and turned back to land. 'Tigger' for that was the name on the tag, had been thrown (presumably in a nautical sense rather than literal) from his owners boat as they travelled from Key Largo to Marathon. They had spent two and a half hours looking for him. Tigger and owners were reunited at the Upper Keys Animal Shelter where he had been dropped when his rescuers couldn't get a reply at the number on his tag.

A woman thought missing for two weeks was found dead in the home she shared with family in New Port Richey. She was found wedged behind a bookcase in her room. Mariesa Weber disappeared October 28th when the 38-year-old had greeted her mother after returning home that day but wasn't seen again. Her family thought she had been kidnapped and contacted authorities. Late one night Weber's sister went into her bedroom and looked behind a bookcase, where she saw a foot. Using a flashlight the family saw Weber was wedged upside-down behind the unit. Weber's family thinks she may have been trying to adjust a plug to a television that was behind the bookshelf when she fell behind it. A spokesman for the Pasco County Sheriff's Office said the death is not suspicious and that Weber appeared to have died because she was unable to breath in that position.

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December 2006 & January 2007

Theme Park News

A Gorilla at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens drowned when he fell into the moat surrounding his enclosure after being chased by another gorilla. Zoo staff were observing the incident, but a rescue was briefly delayed as the other gorilla refused to leave the area and staff had to approach from the 'wrong' side of the moat.

Gatorland suffered a major blow when its landmark entrance was damaged and the gift shop was destroyed in a fire in early November. No animals were hurt in the fire which began in a walkway. An admissions area formerly used by school trips has been pressed into general service and the park reopened on 24th November to large crowds. A small alligator performed the opening ribbon cutting ceremony, and guests were welcomed back into the park. The two and a half week closure had given time for landscaping and a lick of paint all around, but the traditional favourites are all there. The badly burned entrance will be fully restored soon.

Cypress Gardens has plans to increase attractions to lure more families to the Polk County attraction. One is an historic 43-year old wooden roller coaster called Starliner formerly the main attraction at the Miracle Strip amusement park on Panama City Beach. There will also be a new children's area called Bugsville which will feature 13 rides.

"Finding Nemo-The Musical" has opened in Animal Kingdom. The show takes place several times daily in the 'Theatre of the Wild' formerly the stage for Tarzan, which has now been enclosed. The first pictures and reviews I have seen are full of praise for this puppetry show. The puppets are large scale, and moved by humans in coordinated outfits. It will particularly suit younger children who have seen the film, but is good all round family entertainment. "Finding Nemo-The Musical" tells the story of the overly cautious father clownfish, Marlin, along with his absent-minded friend Dory, as they swim with the sharks, take on the jellyfish and ride the current with Crush the turtle, all in a heroic effort to rescue everyone's favourite clownfish, Nemo.

Disney's "Year of a Million Dreams" got off to a fantastic start in October when for the first time in history, a family had the Magic Kingdom all to themselves. They entered the park to a view never seen before by any Disney guest -- Main Street, U.S.A. completely empty, no other guests, no Disney cast members, just a red carpet stretching out a welcome. The family had their pick of favourite attractions. There were no lines

because no one else was there. But there were more surprises in store. As the family reached the center of Main Street, U.S.A., fanfare trumpeters broke the morning silence from atop the buildings lining the street and the familiar strains of "Be Our Guest" began to play -- a signal for a whole lot of smiles. Appearing almost magically to form a receiving line fit for royalty were 1,500 Disney cast members and Disney characters, beaming and bubbly.

They are not the only winners in the mega promotion:

Bellhops at The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror surprised 10-year-old Jack Caprio of Littleton, Colo, when they made him an honorary "junior bellhop" at the Disney-MGM Studios thrill attraction. Prior to the theme park's opening, Caprio was presented a bellhop jacket and hat by attraction bellhop T.J. Wollard before he and his family were personally escorted to the attraction to be the first guests to ride the attraction for the day.

A simple tap on the shoulder was all it took for the Hawkins family of Miramar, Fla. to win a dream vacation to Walt Disney World Resort as part of Disney's "Year of a Million Dreams." As they exited the Spaceship Earth attraction in Epcot on Nov. 22, 2006, they were randomly chosen by a member of the Disney "Dream Squad" to receive the vacation for four to return to Walt Disney World Resort, valued at more than \$5,000. The Hawkins also were named "Grand Marshals" for the day at Epcot and taken on a VIP ride, high atop a double-decker bus, through the park with the Disney characters.

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