

GOP Aiming To Axe State Income Taxes

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A year after Republicans swept into office across the country, many have trained their sights on what has long been a fiscal conservative's dream: the steep reduction or even outright elimination of state income taxes.

The idea has circulated among academics and think-tank researchers for years. But it's moving quietly into mainstream political discourse, despite the fact that such sweeping changes would almost certainly mean a total rewiring of tax systems at a time when most states are still struggling in the aftermath of the recession.

"I think there's going to be more action that way," especially as Republican governors release their budget plans, said Kim Rueben, an expert on state taxation at the Brookings Urban Tax Policy Center.

Last year, GOP lawmakers in many states quickly went to work on a new conservative agenda: restricting abortion, cracking down on illegal immigration, expanding gun rights and taking aim at public-employee unions.

Emboldened by that success, the party has launched income tax efforts in Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma and South Carolina. But it's not clear how all those states would make up for the lost revenue, and Rueben said she's not aware of any state in modern history that has eliminated an income tax.

Study: Big Snakes Killing Everglades Mammals

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — A burgeoning population of huge pythons — many of them pets that were turned loose by their owners when they got too big — appears to be wiping out large numbers of raccoons, opossums, bobcats and other mammals in the Everglades, a study says.

The study, published Monday in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found that sightings of medium-size mammals are down dramatically — as much as 99 percent, in some cases — in areas where pythons and other large, non-native constrictor snakes are known to be lurking.

Scientists fear the pythons could disrupt the food chain and upset the Everglades' environmental balance in ways difficult to predict.

"The effects of declining mammal populations on the overall Everglades ecosystem, which extends well beyond the national park boundaries, are likely profound," said John Willson, a research scientist at Virginia Tech University and co-author of the study.

Tens of thousands of Burmese pythons, which are native to Southeast Asia, are believed to be living in the Everglades, where they thrive in the warm, humid climate. While many were apparently released by their owners, others may have escaped from pet shops during Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and have been reproducing ever since.

Syrian Forces Pushing To Retake Suburbs

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian forces pushed dissident troops back from the edge of Damascus in heavy fighting Monday, escalating efforts to take back control of the capital's eastern doorstep ahead of key U.N. talks over a draft resolution demanding that President Bashar Assad step aside.

Gunfire and the boom of shelling rang out in several suburbs on Damascus' outskirts that have come under the domination of anti-regime fighters. Gunmen — apparently army defectors — were shown firing back in amateur videos posted online by activists. In one video, a government tank on the snow-dusted mountain plateau towering over the capital fired at one of the suburbs below.

As the bloodshed increased, with activists reporting more than 40 civilians killed Monday, Western and Arab countries stepped up pressure on Assad's ally Russia to overcome its opposition to the resolution.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the British and French foreign ministers were heading to New York to push for backing of the measure during talks Tuesday at the United Nations.

"The status quo is unsustainable," Clinton said, saying the Assad regime was preventing a peaceful transition and warning that the resulting instability could "spill over throughout the region."

Fla. Officials Defend Fateful Highway Decision

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (AP) — The Florida Highway Patrol says conditions were clear when they decided to reopen the interstate highway where 10 people were killed in two deadly pileups amid heavy smoke and fog.

Lt. Patrick Riordan said Monday in a news conference that visibility quickly deteriorated after they reopened the highway early Sunday morning. The crashes started shortly after.

About midnight, the highway patrol closed Interstate 75 near Gainesville because of low visibility but reopened it about 3:30 a.m. Pileups began about 15 minutes later, with survivors describing smoke and fog so thick they couldn't see.

Riordan says troopers did their "due diligence" before a sergeant and lieutenant decided to reopen the road. He says drivers have to be alert and be prepared to make good judgments.

Americans Given Refuge At Cairo Embassy

CAIRO (AP) — Three American citizens barred from leaving Egypt have sought refuge at the American Embassy in Cairo amid growing tensions between the two allies over an Egyptian investigation into foreign-funded pro-democracy groups.

The White House said Monday it was disappointed with Egypt's handling of the issue, which U.S. officials have warned could stand in the way of more than \$1 billion in badly needed U.S. aid.

The growing spat between the two longtime allies reflects the uncertainty as they redefine their relationship nearly one year after the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak following an 18-day popular uprising.

Mubarak was a steadfast U.S. ally, scrupulously maintaining Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and while seeking to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians — a clear American interest.

Now, Egypt's council of ruling generals, who took power when Mubarak stood down last Feb. 11, often accuse "foreign hands" of promoting protests against their rule.

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Decision 2012

Romney Tightens Screws On Newt

BY THOMAS BEAUMONT
Associated Press

MIAMI — Cheered by new polls, Mitt Romney is all but predicting victory in Tuesday's Republican presidential primary. Newt Gingrich is looking past Florida to regroup, vowing he won't stay buried long.

"With a turnout like this, I'm beginning to feel we might win tomorrow," an upbeat Romney told a crowd of several hundred at a stop in Dunedin on Monday as he and Gingrich zipped across the state making their final appeals.

Gingrich, in turn, acknowledged that his momentum had been checked but promised not to back down. He characterized Romney as an imposter, and his team started to plot a strategy for upcoming contests.

"He can bury me for a very short amount of time with four or five or six times as much money," Gingrich said in a television interview. "In the long run, the Republican Party is not

going to nominate ... a liberal Republican."

GOP officials in Florida were anticipating a big turnout, more than 2 million voters, up from a record 1.9 million in the Republican primary in 2008. More than 605,000 Floridians had already voted as of Monday, either by visiting early voting stations or by mailing in absentee ballots, ahead of the total combined early vote in the GOP primary four years ago.

In the span of a volatile week, the tables have turned in this potentially pivotal primary state.

Gingrich rode a triumphant wave into Florida after a South Carolina victory nine days ago. But since then, Romney and his allies have pummeled the former House speaker on TV and on the campaign trail. Romney turned in two

Romney

strong debate performances, while Gingrich faltered. Now opinion polls show the former Massachusetts governor with a comfortable lead here.

Romney and Gingrich have been the only two candidates to compete in Florida in earnest. Neither former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum nor Texas Rep. Ron. Paul campaigned much in the state, and they were elsewhere on Monday.

Clearly in command, Romney flew to stops in media markets in northern Florida and the populous swing regions of central Florida, determined to keep Gingrich from surging late.

Romney renewed attacks on his rival as an untrustworthy, Washington influence peddler at the outset of two separate appearances Monday. He claimed that Gingrich's ties to federally backed mortgage giant Freddie Mac have hurt the former speaker in a state wracked by the foreclosure crisis.

President Barack Obama meets with President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia in the Oval Office of the White House Monday.

President To Call For Small Business Tax, Investment Breaks

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fleshing out a year-old initiative, the Obama administration wants Congress to enact or expand tax breaks for small businesses and remove barriers to startups, seizing on some existing bipartisan proposals that could win support even in the polarized climate of an election year.

White House officials say President Barack Obama will call on Congress Tuesday to pass legislation that, among other measures, would eliminate tax rates on capital gains for investments in small businesses and extend for a year the ability of all businesses to immediately deduct all of the costs of equipment and software purchases.

The legislative package, which will be part of Obama's 2013 budget proposal later this month, also would include a new 10 percent tax credit for small business that add jobs or increase wages in 2012. In addition, the legislation would make it easier for new startup companies to raise money and to go public. It also would expand a government small business investment

program from \$3 billion to \$4 billion.

"The president has made small businesses and particularly start-ups a key aspect of his economic growth agenda because he understands how much the newest and fastest-growing small businesses drive job growth in our economy," said Gene Sperling, director of the White House National Economic Council.

The proposals borrow from past Obama initiatives and from bipartisan legislation that has either already passed in the House or is being proposed in the Senate. Obama's package includes proposals offered in the Senate by Democrat Chris Coons of Delaware and Republican Marco Rubio of Florida and another plan by Republican Jerry Moran of Kansas and Democrat Mark Warner of Virginia.

White House officials would not disclose the total cost of the president's package, but Sperling said it would be more than covered by proposals to reduce tax expenditures and by closed loopholes that the administration will call for in its 2013 budget.

Senators: New Penalties On Iran Needed

WASHINGTON (AP) — Determined to weaken Iran economically, a top Senate Democrat and Republican on Monday unveiled a bill to impose sweeping new penalties on Tehran and thwart its nuclear ambitions.

Senate Banking Committee Chairman Tim Johnson, D-S.D., and Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby, the panel's top Republican, said they had agreed on the measure that would target Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, require companies that trade on the U.S. stock exchange to disclose any Iran-related business to the Securities and Exchange Commission, and expand penalties for energy and uranium mining joint ventures with Tehran.

The bill also would deny visas and freeze assets on individuals and companies that supply Iran with technology that could be used to crack down on its citizens, such as tear gas, rubber bullets and surveillance equipment.

Johnson and Shelby said their committee would consider the legislation on Thursday.

"A nuclear-armed Iran would represent a grave threat to regional peace and international security," Johnson said in a joint statement with Shelby. "Iran's continuing defiance of its international legal obligations and refusal to come clean on its nuclear program underscore the need to further isolate Iran and its leaders."

Shelby said the bill "sends a clear signal through strong measures that Iran must abandon its nuclear weapons program and its designs for the spread of international terror."

A report in November suggested that some of the Islamic Republic's alleged experiments could have no other purpose than developing nuclear weapons. Iran contends that its program is designed to generate electricity, not build weapons. A U.N. inspection team currently is in the country.

Both the Obama administration and the international community have imposed tough sanctions on Iran. Johnson and Shelby said those penalties have been insufficient in deterring Tehran from pursuing a nuclear weapon.

Johnson

U.S. Incomes Move Up In December, But Spending Flat

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans' income rose in December by the most in nine months, a hopeful sign for the economy after a year of weak wage gains. But consumers didn't spend any more than they had in November.

Americans ended up saving all their additional income.

Economists noted that income rose last month largely because of strong hiring. The economy added 200,000 jobs in December. More jobs mean more income available to spend.

The best hope for the economy is further job gains. On Friday, the

government is expected to report another solid month of hiring for January.

Income rose 0.5 percent from November to December, the Commerce Department said Monday. It was the sharpest increase since a similar gain in March.

The flat spending in December followed scant gains of 0.1 percent in both October and November.

For all of 2011, income barely rose. And consumers tapped their savings to spend more.

But in December, Americans boosted their savings. If they continue to save any additional in-

come rather than spend it, the economy could slow. And that could force employers to pull back on hiring.

Consumer spending accounts for about 70 percent of economic activity.

Many economists are holding out hope, though, that continued job gains will mean more spending

across the economy.

"The pace of job growth in recent months, while still not satisfactory compared to most past cycles, at least seems sufficient to generate enough income growth to keep consumer spending moving ahead at a modest pace," said Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at MFR, Inc.

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