

Supporter's votes dull Sharpe attack ad

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TAMPA - Republican Mark Sharpe calls Democrat Jim Davis the "Tallahassee taxer," saying he voted for 195 tax and fee increases in the state Legislature.

But Davis wasn't the only one voting aye.

State Sen. John Grant, Sharpe's campaign co-chairman, and just about every other Republican member of the Hillsborough delegation voted for nearly all of them as well.

Sharpe launched a television attack Wednesday blaming Davis for voting for "almost \$ 4 billion dollars" in tax increases, but most of the votes cited by Sharpe deal with fees, fines and penalties as opposed to general tax increases, according to a Tampa Tribune analysis of the votes. And a majority of the increases passed nearly unanimously.

For example, one of the fees was sponsored by Republican state Rep. Victor Crist, chairman of the Hillsborough delegation. It calls for a charge of up to \$ 150 to pay for background checks of people wanting to become police officers. The bill passed 114 to 1 in the House and 39 to 0 in the Senate. Republican state Sens. Malcolm Beard, Charlie Crist and Grant were part of the unanimous Senate vote.

Victor Crist said that many times the Legislature is trying to identify the costs and make those who benefit pay for the program instead of making the taxpayer subsidize it. He mentioned one particular vote this session where talent agencies asked the state to impose a fee on the industry so that they could continue to be regulated by the state.

Victor Crist has voted "no" more than Davis, but his record shows that he agreed with Davis more often than he disagreed.

Does that make him a "Tallahassee taxer?"

"Oh God no," said Victor Crist.

Sharpe is right to point out Davis' record on major tax votes, but "maybe Mark's reaching a little far on some of these minor ones," Victor Crist said.

Reaching indeed, said Darrell West, a Brown University political scientist and author of the 1993 book "Air Wars" about television's effect on politics.

"This is a classic example of taking votes out of context. It's trying to make a point but it seems to be doing it in such an exaggerated manner that it strains credibility," West said. "Each of these votes did represent a tax increase of one sort or other so there is a kernel of truth to it. It's the spin that gets put on the votes that creates the problem making the leap that this person is the taxman from Hell."

Sharpe would not comment on his claims, but his campaign manager Paul Moore said Thursday that Sharpe would have voted against every single tax and fee increase had he been in the state Legislature.

"Mark believes Jim's record is very bad," Moore said.

In August, Sharpe and dozens of other Hillsborough County elected officials and candidates were asked their position on the half-cent sales tax proposal that county voters approved Sept. 3.

After a candidates forum, Sharpe made it clear he didn't want to discuss the tax by walking briskly down the street to his car.

It's a local issue, Sharpe noted, not one he'd have to deal with in Congress. Moore said Sharpe wouldn't say if he was for or against the tax.

Sharpe is concentrating on Davis' record and not on fellow Republicans in Tallahassee, Moore said. It would be a different state if the Republicans were in the majority and held the governor's mansion as well, Moore said.

West says Moore's reasoning is flawed. "If it's a vote in favor it still counts toward the total."

Many of the bills that Davis and the Republicans supported were sponsored by Republican legislators. And the GOP has controlled the state Senate in three of the last four years. Republican former Gov. Bob Martinez, also a Sharpe campaign co-chairman, supported the later-repealed sales tax on services in 1987 and a half-cent sales tax increase that replaced the services tax.

Grant said he didn't recall all of the votes, but that "certainly a lot of them had a lot of bipartisan support.

"A person has to live with their voting record," Grant said. "You may be able to justify the way you voted all day long, but you still voted that way."

Moore blasted Davis for voting to impose a per-day tax on nursing home beds in 1991. Grant, Beard and former Republican state Rep. Chris Corr all voted for the bill too. He also criticized Davis for charging, in a bill this year, a tax to hospitals for every live birth. Victor Crist, Charlie Crist, Grant, Beard, and state Reps. Buddy Johnson and Faye Culp all voted for the bill as well, which was co-sponsored by Republican Rudy Garcia of Hialeah.

In 1991, Davis voted in favor of a bill raising the filing fee for candidates to run for office. His Republican colleagues from Hillsborough did oppose that bill, one of the few votes on which they differed in Davis' eight years in Tallahassee.

"Every time the budget is passed, legislators vote to continue existing taxes and just about every budget contains some fee or tax increase," said Neil Crispo, senior vice president for research and operations at the nonpartisan Florida Taxwatch, which studies state taxation and budget policy.

"Voting against the budget means you're not doing your job," Crispo said. The unanimity of most of these votes indicates they are the result of compromises and "that's what the legislative process is all about."

Voting in unanimous groups doesn't make one a taxer, Crispo said. If Davis failed to seek out accountability or to streamline government and he votes for everything, that's different.

To say you'd oppose all 195, "Then how would you support public schools, medical services and universities? How would you have gotten money for that?" Crispo asked.

Davis said he wants the campaign to stick to the issues and that he stands by his record. Throughout the Democratic primary, Davis discussed legislation he sponsored this year to require an outside audit of the Hillsborough school district in an effort to move more money out of administration and into the classroom.

"I've got my faults and weaknesses and everything, but this is ridiculous," Davis said. "If he has criticized my votes, how would he have voted and why?"

Sharpe's comments that he would vote against every one of the increases "reflects a huge lack of understanding about how the Legislature works, what services government provides and who pays for them," Davis said.

"To take the approach of opposing each of these fees would have effectively shut down the provision of many essential services by state government."

Davis' campaign released a report of all of the increases he has supported, which he says total \$ 3.2 billion, not the nearly \$ 4 billion Sharpe uses in the campaign commercial. Staff writer Michael Fechter and researcher Dean Solov contributed to this report.