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Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
For Gov. Charlie Crist, a battered image and uncertain future	12/31/2009	St. Petersburg Times - Online	Steve Bousquet
25.DEC.09 2009 In Review Palm Beach CountyCorruption Reforms And Budget Cuts	12/30/2009	Town-Crier Newspapers, The	
Top eNews Stories For 2009	12/28/2009	Growing Produce - Online	

For Gov. Charlie Crist, a battered image and uncertain future

12/31/2009

[Return to Top](#)

St. Petersburg Times - Online

Steve Bousquet

By and Marc Caputo, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Charlie Crist's final year as governor begins like no other: with perilous poll numbers, his optimism worn thin and his shell of political Teflon deeply scratched.

After two years of governing Florida by shrewdly gauging the prevailing political winds, Crist strayed off course as the economy spiraled downward in 2009, his nice-guy image no longer effective as a balm for frustrated Floridians.

He miscalculated the danger of his "man hug" with President Barack Obama in support of the Democrats' stimulus package. He signed a no-new taxes pledge only to raise taxes weeks later to balance the state budget. And the biggest contributor in his campaign for U.S. Senate, Fort Lauderdale lawyer Scott Rothstein, was charged in a \$1.2 billion Ponzi scheme.

By year's end, his Republican Senate rival, Marco Rubio, had gained ground as a conservative alternative.

"It's been a rough patch, and certainly some of it's self-inflicted. No question. I mean, that happens. Nobody's perfect," Crist said in an interview with the Times/Herald. "But you learn from that, I think."

Crist acknowledged "it's certainly possible" that his intense focus on raising millions of dollars as a Senate candidate diverted attention from his duties as chief executive of the nation's fourth-most populous state.

"I'm not always on my game. None of us are," Crist said. "But I feel very good about where I am now, and self-assured and confident about where we need to go and what Florida needs to do. I'm very confident in our administration. Things are going well at the office."

Crist's difficulties underscore the hazards of governing in volatile times, the fickleness of Florida's electorate and the perils of populism and bipartisanship.

Quick with a warm smile and warmer handshake, the 53-year-old Crist has led a charmed political life as a state senator, education commissioner, attorney general and now governor. In the early years, approval ratings for the Republican from St. Petersburg soared in the 70s.

But by October 2009, there was a stunning turnabout. A Times/Herald/Bay News 9 poll showed his job performance was viewed more negatively (55 percent) than positively (42 percent) by Floridians.

Just a year ago, Crist appeared politically invincible as he harbored ambitions of heading to Washington.

He had emerged as a national figure after making a surprise endorsement that helped John McCain win Florida's Republican primary and, ultimately, the party's nomination for president. A vice-presidential short-lister, Crist soaked up national media attention but remained far enough away from McCain's campaign to avoid major criticism when the Arizona senator became the first Republican to lose Florida in more than a decade.

Newly married to New York socialite and businesswoman Carole Rome, Crist spent the days just before 2009 hunting for Christmas gifts in the rural North Florida antique mecca of Havana. There Crist ran into a local who paid him such a compliment that he pulled a reporter aside and made her repeat it.

"I believe he's a closet Democrat," Shirley Aaron said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," Crist said. "We have, in Florida, Republicans and Democrats and independents, but we're all Floridians first."

Crist had a different response exactly a year later when asked to respond to someone calling him a closet Democrat.

"I'm a Republican. I think I'm a pragmatic conservative and a Republican," Crist said. "I hope we have a party that has sort of a Jack Kemp view that you need to have a big tent to be successful."

The most enduring moment of Crist's year came Feb. 10 when he appeared on stage with the president in Fort Myers to endorse and urge congressional approval of a \$787 billion stimulus package. The federal money was a must for Crist and his fellow Republicans in the Legislature because it allowed the state to avoid unpopular tax increases or major spending decreases.

Crist stiffly embraced Obama on stage. The so-called "man hug" infuriated conservatives and could prove to be the defining image that costs Crist a seat in the U.S. Senate. Crist insists he showed the proper respect for Obama, visiting Florida for the first time as president.

"The Obama embrace was the worst 15 seconds of his political life," said Rick Hartley, the Republican state committeeman in Jacksonville's Duval County. "Northeast Florida is very conservative and people will just not let go of that. But they should. He did what he felt was necessary."

Under fire from Rubio, Crist waffled. He denied he endorsed and supported the stimulus plan, and later reversed his reversal. Crist also did an about-face on returning political contributions to the now-defunct Rothstein Rosenfeldt Adler law firm at the center of a Ponzi-scheme inquiry in Broward County.

Days before the Rothstein scandal broke, Crist called for a statewide grand jury to investigate corruption. Then his handpicked Republican Party chairman, Jim Greer, came under fire over allegations of mismanaging party money. And Miami Congressmen Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart unexpectedly withdrew their Senate endorsement of Crist with little explanation just three days before Christmas.

His position worsening, Crist recently began dialing back the optimism in favor of speaking negatively of Rubio. But Crist never says the name of the former House speaker from West Miami.

"It really doesn't matter to me what the scoring of political points might accomplish. I think that's very important to my opponent," Crist said.

"They want to run to the right of anybody in order to achieve a primary victory and I think they're missing the picture."

But Rubio's technique is working. He's rising in the polls as Crist falls, in part because of the legacy of the governor's plans to fight global warming or restore civil rights for some ex-cons — positions anathema to many conservatives.

"They're going through what every party goes through after a loss — a cleansing and purifying phase — and they're looking at him and saying, 'Who the hell are you?' " said Democratic strategist Steve Schale, who managed Obama's successful Florida campaign and is now advising state Sen. Dan Gelber, a Miami Beach Democrat running for attorney general.

Echoing Republican critics, Schale said Crist has been too much of a populist, basing too many policies on what was in vogue. He leapt from issue to issue, often without any clear focus beyond what he repeatedly says is a desire to look out for his "boss, the people."

As a result, Crist hasn't had a make-or-break issue that marked his tenure, the way education did for former Gov. Jeb Bush. Many of his proposals, from health care to the economy to property tax cuts, have been scaled back or remain unfinished. On climate change, he turned his back when it became unpopular in his party.

Critics on the right and left have cast Crist as a quitter, noting he is the first governor to not seek a second term since a state Constitutional change in 1968 allowed governors to do so.

"Charlie is a very likable, respectful friendly politician," said Barney Bishop, executive director of the business lobby Associated Industries of Florida. "But I think people wanted more than just cheerfulness. They want somebody who will change what's going on."

The governor's closest adviser and former chief of staff, U.S. Sen. George LeMieux, said it will take time for Crist's accomplishments to be fully appreciated. He cited the downsized purchase of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration and high-speed and commuter rail projects.

"These are things that will take a long time to bear fruit," said LeMieux, whom Crist appointed to a U.S. Senate vacancy in August.

Crist is already promoting the rail package as a success. He also cites a decline in violent crime and takes credit for giving state universities the leeway to increase tuition as a way to retain faculty members.

But even LeMieux, whom Crist called his "maestro" for leading his successful 2006 governor's race in a year when Republicans were clobbered nationally, might be a liability. By picking his friend to warm the coveted seat, Crist drew charges of cronyism from Democrats and Republicans alike.

When Crist took office in 2007, the unemployment rate was 3.3 percent — less than a third of what it is now as more than 1 million Floridians can't find work. One in every 705 Florida homes was in foreclosure when he took office. Now the foreclosure rate is 1 of 165, according to RealtyTrac data service.

Even Crist's staunchest critics say many of Florida's woes are largely beyond his control. But they question whether Crist did what he could when he could. When the economy deteriorated, Crist paid visits to regional unemployment centers and held roundtable discussions with veterans and real estate agents, but he didn't propose and implement specific policies to halt the tide of foreclosures and layoffs.

"It's nice to emphasize and feel their pain, but people expect elected officials to do something and make their life better," said Bishop of Associated Industries, which opposes Crist's regulatory and insurance policies.

Facing uncertainty as he embarks upon his final year as governor, Crist still shows glimpses of his trademark optimism that once charmed Florida voters.

"All in all, I think it's been a good year — a good year in challenging times," Crist said. "These are tough times. It sure hasn't been dull, to say the least, by any stretch."

Steve Bousquet can be reached at bousquet@sptimes.com or (850) 224-7263. Marc Caputo can be reached at mcaputo@MiamiHerald.com.

25.DEC.09 2009 In Review Palm Beach County Corruption Reforms And Budget Cuts

[Return to Top](#)

12/30/2009

Town-Crier Newspapers, The

officials hope that 2009 marks the end of the "Corruption County" era and the beginning of a new era of good government.

After three years of county scandals resulting in three commissioners serving jail sentences and a scathing grand jury report, the Commission in December adopted ordinances aimed to erase the stain of corruption. The commissioners created an Office of the Inspector General, a Commission on Ethics and a Code of Ethics.

The inspector general ordinance follows the format of the same office in Miami-Dade County and will be paid for with a charge to the governments that contract for the office's oversight. But even as the commission was adopting the ordinances, some residents and County Commissioner Jess Santamaria chastised county officials for not making the inspector general more autonomous. The county plans to ask voters in a 2010 referendum to make the inspector general and other ethics reforms part of the county charter, which would give the position permanence and more independence. The inspector general is to be selected by a committee made up of the five-member Commission on Ethics, plus the state attorney and public defender or their designees. In addition to appointing or removing the inspector general, the Commission on Ethics will be responsible for handing down penalties for violations of the local ethics code. TRASH TALKIN' After more than a decade of debate over a new landfill site, the county commission rejected existing land offers in October, instead pinning hopes on a future land trade with the South Florida Water Management District.

County commissioners want some of the 73,000 acres of land that the water management district is negotiating to buy from U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration in return for 1,600 acres the Solid Waste Authority owns near the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. That land was to be the site of the new landfill before it was rejected on environmental grounds. Commissioners delayed choosing a new landfill site for 12 months.

Despite so many years of planning, the commissioners agreed that the sites they were considering were being offered at prices as much as 3.5 times their value. Besides, solid waste staff has said that the slowdown in growth and economic hardships have caused a falloff in trash as well, meaning the existing landfill won't reach capacity quite as soon. Additionally, the SWA's planned waste-to-energy plant could dramatically reduce waste heading to the landfill.

TIGHTENING THE BELT

In September, county commissioners approved a reduced operating budget of \$1.109 billion, down \$19 million from the 2008 budget of \$1.128 billion.

To cut expenses, the county required 10-percent cuts to nearly all departments, eliminating more than 600 staff positions. But the budget still included \$27 million more than the previous year for the Sheriff's Office. raised the tax rate to 4.33 mills from last year's 3.781 to generate more tax dollars even though property values have dropped.

And the pain has only just begun, county officials said, projecting the 2011 budget to be \$100 million smaller. Between 2001 and 2007, the county's personnel grew from 3,800 in 2002 to 4,400 in 2007. To meet next year's budget, the county already is planning to slash about 600 more positions, reducing the county's workforce back to the 3,800 it had in 2002.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

In August, Florida Power & Light activated the first of three planned generating units at its new West County Energy Center, and was scheduled to activate a second before the end of the year. The third is expected to power up in 2011. Each unit at the plant, located off Southern Blvd. near 20-Mile Bend, will supply 1,250 megawatts, enough energy to supply about 250,000 homes and businesses, using natural gas, one of the cleanest burning of the fossil fuels, according to FPL representatives.

The plant was located near existing power transmission lines needed to relay the electricity it generates. The generators use water from the Floridan aquifer for cooling and steam production, but FPL plans to use reclaimed water - partially treated wastewater - for those purposes by early 2011. Once a pipeline to deliver the reclaimed water is extended from the plant near Florida's Turnpike, the plant will use about 27 million gallons of reclaimed water. While 80 percent of the water will be evaporated, 20 percent will be injected into deep wells.

Environmental groups, including the Audubon Society of the Everglades, have opposed the plant because it's located near the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and because they're concerned about its emissions.

FOLKE PETERSON SHUTS DOWN

In July, the Folke Peterson Wildlife Center closed because it ran out of money. Before closing its doors, the five-year-

old non-profit organization had to release or move more than 350 injured and displaced native Florida wildlife. About 50 animals that could not be released because of the seriousness of their injuries were sent to other wildlife centers, nature centers, zoos or museums. The center took in 5,500 to 6,000 injured animals annually, according to nature center representatives. The nearest alternative wildlife rehabilitation centers are the Busch Wildlife Sanctuary in Jupiter and the Wildlife Care Center in Fort Lauderdale.

INLAND PORT MANEUVERS

Over objections from Glades-area officials, the Commission approved an amendment to the master plan for the Port of Palm Beach that could allow a coveted inland transportation center to be built somewhere outside the county. Glades officials see the proposed inland port as the answer to the area's high unemployment.

The amendment was the port's effort to incorporate language to promote development of the inland port. A staff report called the change minor, but representatives from the Glades took umbrage.

A Port of Palm Beach official said the language had to be included to qualify for federal funding. The port had applied for federal dollars to build a railway, which will run through several counties. He added that the port does not have control over many aspects of the transportation network. By year's end, a site in the Glades owned by Florida Crystals emerged as the top contender for the inland port, but the project is likely still several years away. more . . . 25.DEC.09 2009 In Review: Corruption Reforms And Budget Cutssearch archivesKeywords: Issue date: Type either Keywords, Date or both. Date examples: 5/30/02, New This Week 2009 In Review: Corruption Reforms And Budget Cuts Art Society Nancy Fontana Greenfield Recommend Happy Hour Specials At CityPlace

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Top eNews Stories For 2009

12/28/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Growing Produce - Online

Based on metrics tracked from Florida Grower eNews, here are the top 10 most read online stories from 2009.

1. Rare Bug Found At Miami Airport (Sept. 1)
2. Citrus Greening Research Breakthrough (Feb. 16)
3. Bronson Announces Arrests For Citrus Quarantine Violations (Nov. 24)
4. Freeze: Damage Reports A Mixed Bag (Jan. 27)
5. More U.S. Sugar Shakeup (Feb. 3)
6. Department Of Ag Takes Action On Abandoned Groves (March 10)
7. South Florida Water Management District Cuts Ag Water Usage (May 19)
8. Company Announces Plans For Florida's First Cellulosic Ethanol Plant (Jan. 20)
9. EPA Agrees To New Limits On Fertilizer And Animal Waste In Florida (Aug. 25)

