

Flap over tourism dollars continues

By Steve Bousquet

Florida tourism executives endured a second withering round of criticism from legislators Wednesday for spending scarce tax dollars on bonuses for executives, overseas travel and other perks.

Desperate to close a state budget deficit that could reach \$6-billion next year, senators culled line by line through spending by VisitFlorida, a tax-supported agency that promotes Florida around the world. Senators questioned \$1.3-million for travel, \$500,000 to entertain travel writers and \$85,000 for four directors' meetings.

Sen. Alex Diaz de la Portilla, R-Miami, said he dialed the agency's call center five times and kept getting wrong information about Florida, such as that landlocked Tallahassee had a beach. "It is shocking to me," Diaz de la Portilla said when official conceded they never called the call center themselves.

VisitFlorida reports to the tourism office under Gov. Charlie Crist. He agency's chief executive officer, Bud Nocera, said marketing Florida would be impossible without at assist from Florida taxpayers, and that he agency has to make sure lawmakers know that, "we are doing a great job for the state of Florida."

Dissecting the agency's budget, Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, noted that VisitFlorida is spending about \$18-million on advertising, which he called "the absolute No.1 priority," but taxpayers give the agency \$35-million, which accounts for more than half of its \$64-million in operating cash.

Taxpayer support for VisitFlorida has steadily increased from \$22-million in 2003 to \$35-million this year. Tourism executives produced a chart showing a steady increase in tourism, from 45-illion visitors in 1996 when the agency was created to more than 80-million in 2007.