

Crist changes tune on support for Obama's stimulus

Contributed by BRENT KALLESTAD

TALLAHASSEE (AP) _ In a heated race for the Republican U.S. Senate nomination, Gov. Charlie Crist keeps moving away from his support of President Barack Obama's stimulus package that the governor called ``fantastic" and ``remarkable" when lobbying for its passage.

Faced with an increasingly difficult primary challenge from former House Speaker Marco Rubio of West Miami, the governor now claims he didn't endorse the \$787 billion economic stimulus that included a generous contribution for Florida.

``It seems to be the president's answer to almost every challenge that's facing our country is to spend more money," Crist said Thursday.

He commented in response to a question while on his way back to his office where he planned to work on putting together a special legislative session to get more stimulus money for a high speed rail system in the state.

But on a national cable news show Wednesday night, Crist said he saw the stimulus more as Florida taxpayers' dollars coming back to the state and that he didn't endorse the Obama plan.

Hardly what the governor said earlier this year when he was voicing support for the stimulus.

``I think it's fantastic, are you kidding me?" Crist said Feb. 20. ``It'll help Florida do our job market. It's remarkable."

Crist then said it would mean Florida wouldn't have to raise taxes.

``We might be able to cut property taxes some more," he said. ``We have more money for education funding so we can increase the per-student funding. We can spend more money on our roads and infrastructure. We can provide health care for our people."

And the governor was only too happy to accept Florida's share, joining Obama for

the stimulus rally in Fort Myers where he hugged the president.

``We know that it's important that we pass this stimulus package," Crist said on that February day. ``We need to do it in a bipartisan way. This is not about partisan politics. This is about rising above that."

Crist conceded Thursday the stimulus money has been good for Florida.

``The opportunity, as I understand the numbers, to have about, more than 20,000 teachers not lose their jobs because of it, construction continuing to go forward, I want to talk about more," Crist said. ``It'll help Florida."

Rubio's campaign released a video with excerpts showing several examples of Crist praising the president's stimulus plan.

``Unfortunately for Charlie Crist, the evidence of his stimulus support is on video," Rubio campaign spokesman Alex Burgos said Thursday. ``By denying he infamously supported the stimulus, Charlie Crist is hoping he can reinvent his record and that voters forget he once embraced it."

Rubio has cut deeply into Crist's early lead in their battle for the 2010 GOP nomination, a Quinnipiac University (Conn.) poll showed last month. Crist had a lead of 29 percentage points in a mid-August survey by Quinnipiac, but that fell to just 15 points in a similar sampling of Republican voters taken Oct. 12-18.

Democratic Party spokesman Eric Jotkoff also didn't wait long to criticize Crist.

``Unfortunately for Crist, the people of Florida know the truth about Charlie Crist always putting his political ambition above doing his job," Jotkoff said.

Pictured above is Gov. Charlie Crist.