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## EDITORIAL

### Our position: Who's effective in the Florida Legislature

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Welcome to the scene of the crime. Central Florida's hopes for commuter rail were set back in the Senate on the Legislature's last day -- and it was one of the region's own senators who led the fight to kill the badly needed, 61-mile train from Volusia County to Osceola County.

The commuter-rail saga provided one of the few dramas in an otherwise dismal session. But even with the state's budget crisis, some lawmakers rose to the occasion.

Here are our views on the effectiveness of Central Florida senators during the 2008 legislative session. We arrived at the rankings after interviews with lawmakers, lobbyists and other key observers, and based them on the senators' impact on statewide issues and the public good.

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#### Top tier

1. Lee Constantine, R- Altamonte Springs. Bipartisan negotiator and Senate's hardest worker. Wielded great influence on environmental issues and on the fight to authorize the Florida Forever land-buying program for another 10 years. Couldn't manage to get a good growth-management bill passed, but successfully defeated efforts to weaken current standards. A master of the budget, he found money for higher education even in this rough economy.

2. Dan Webster, R- Winter Garden. Widely respected, but the majority leader's influence waned at the end of his storied 28-year career. Secured some funding for Wekiva Parkway, and millions of dollars for transportation, including tying toll increases to inflation. Won his four-year fight to make it easier for people wrongly convicted of crimes to be compensated by the state. But even after securing the state's share of the \$615 million for commuter rail, he couldn't close the deal. His failed election-year push for abortion restrictions didn't win him any support from moderates.

#### Part of the pack

3. Mike Haridopolos, R- Melbourne. The Finance and Tax chairman is still in line to become Senate president in 2010. Spent most of this session fighting a proposal at the Budget and Taxation Reform Commission to swap school property taxes for deep cuts or a higher sales tax. An articulate spokesman for the right wing, but couldn't explain away landing a sweet job at the University of Florida while budget cuts mean pink slips for other professors.

4. Carey Baker, R-Eustis. Clawed his way out of the bottom of the barrel this year, but still needs more seasoning (see effort to ban "Truck Nutz"). Over his head at times as transportation chairman. Became a convert on red-light cameras, but wasn't deft enough to get it through and seemed lost on commuter rail. Would be smart to file fewer bills and adopt transportation as his signature issue.

5. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge. Hard working and savvy. Headed for Congress and that distraction showed. The Legislature's expert on insurance, did the grunt work, but saw much of the credit go to incoming Senate President Jeff Atwater, who sees insurance as his issue.

6. Gary Siplin, D-Orlando. With his legal cloud behind him formed unlikely alliance with Republicans on social issues. Vice chairman of education budget committee, worked to minimize school cuts. Despite the dopey "Droopy Drawers" bill, is beginning to be taken more seriously.

Bottom of the barrel

7. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach. Stubborn with a mean streak, she killed sound growth-management changes after lawmakers wouldn't let her pave the way for a developer buddy in her district. Could be far more effective as Higher Education Appropriations Committee chair.

8. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland. The worst. Battled Mr. Webster on commuter rail with an amazing disinformation campaign. Put settling old scores over the needs of thousands of Osceola County residents who are stuck in her Polk County-centered district. Still isn't interested in compromise and that is sure to leave her isolated.

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