Conservative governor ends up pushing taxes

Capitol news bureau

Republican Gov. Mike Foster has found himself in the unexpected role of being a major booster of higher taxes since beginning his second term early this year.

Foster spent most of his first term overseeing a state government that routinely ended its fiscal years with money to spare.

After sweeping to an easy primary re-election victory last fall, Foster began a second term on a decidedly different note. For once, Foster had to deal with a massive budget shortfall.

Although some fiscal analysts had sounded warnings about budget shortfalls, Foster had pointed to less-than-ideal conditions on the financial horizon, Foster maintains the situation took him by surprise.

Louisiana's tax base is heavily reliant on taxes that do not grow very quickly, such as the sales tax.

As a result, the normal growth in government spending has outstripped revenue growth.

The budget situation was complicated by Foster's search for a way to deliver on a 1995 promise to raise public school teacher and college faculty pay to the Southern average — a move that would cost more than $300 million.

Foster scaled down his proposed budget from $14.4 billion to $13.8 billion for the 2000-01 budget year, which began July 1.

The governor's budget did not include money for teacher and college faculty pay hikes.
And Foster found himself a governor in search of the taxes to fund even the scaled-back total.
Foster floated the idea of a new $1.7 billion business productivity tax, but that went nowhere.
Foster gave lip-service to increasing income taxes while reducing sales taxes, but ended up getting behind a patchwork of tax measures that featured another 1 percent sales tax on food and utilities.
Foster's most elusive goal has been his promise to raise teacher and college faculty pay.
Foster initially ran for governor in 1995 with a promise to stop taking his pay as governor if he couldn't get teacher pay to the Southern average within two years of taking office.
Foster does take his $95,000-a-year salary, but after paying taxes he puts the remainder into a special trust fund to provide awards for excellence in education.
Foster was re-elected in the October 1999 primary election, running first in an 11-person field.
Foster got 62 percent of the vote — more than twice as much as his nearest challenger, U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans.
The 1999 governor's race was a low-key affair.
Foster spent most of his time doing fund-raisers and appearing before groups of supporters.
The governor's challengers tried to bash him for controversies that had erupted during his first term and for refusing to participate in candidate forums.
Foster's opponents tried to make a campaign issue of revelations in mid-1999 that Foster had struck a secret deal with ex-Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke during the 1995 governor's race.
Foster admitted to having made a deal to pay Duke $150,000 for exclusive use of a computerized mailing list of Duke supporters.
The transaction came to light in conjunction with a federal grand jury probe in New Orleans.
Foster later entered a consent judgment with the state Board of

Ethics, admitting technical ethics code violations.
Foster's campaign challengers tried to press that deal as a black eye for the state, but they didn't do much to tarnish Foster's popularity with voters.
The Duke incident was one of several controversies that enveloped Foster during his first two terms.

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term — and that failed to hurt his ratings in voter polls.

Foster began his first term under a cloud of racial division after beating state Sen. Cleo Fields, a black Democrat who at the time was a member of Congress.

One of Foster's first acts as governor was to issue an order aimed at eliminating racial preferences in government contracts, a move that infuriated thousands of black people to march in protest near the State Capitol.

Since those early weeks of his term, Foster has shown he is not one to back away from controversy.

During a special legislative session in spring 1996, Foster pushed for state-wide concealed handgun permits, for limits on lawsuits and for allowing voters to directly weigh in on the fate of gambling.

During the 1997 legislative session, Foster pushed — with at least some success in each case — for education changes, putting the charity hospitals under the LSU system and revamping car insurance laws.

Foster frequently brags about getting into politics late in life. In 1996, he was 57 and a millionaire at the time.

Foster served two terms as a Democratic state senator before running for governor in 1995. He switched to the Republican Party the day he formally entered the race.

Foster portrayed an expensive media campaign that stressed "power to the people" into a governor's race victory. Coming from behind, Foster beat out a field that included many well-known statewide politicians.

Foster, whose grandfather served as governor a century ago, says he is bringing a businessman's approach to government and a brand of conservatism that wasn't evident in recent political history.

Foster took out after the state's trial lawyers with a vengeance during his first term, passing a number of bills targeting liability lawsuits that harm businesses' bottom lines.