

**TV**

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chairman of the committee that oversees prison budgets.

But others say Florida can't afford digital TV for inmates when it faces a \$4 billion budget shortfall.

"Get rid of the 1,500 televisions. Give them a book," said Curtis Holmes, president of Taxpayers Association Inc., in Largo. "This is budget-cutting time. They cut hundreds of millions on education, but they want to put money in the prison system so that the prisoners get televisions."

The government is helping families with the cost of the switch to digital by providing \$40 coupons for converter boxes. But jails and prisons can't get them.

Robert Weissert, director of communications for Florida TaxWatch, said the federal government should empty its pockets, not Florida taxpayers.

"It's an example of another unfunded mandate from the federal government that puts pressures on the taxpayers in the state of Florida," Weissert said.

The Department of Corrections will have to purchase converters, priced at \$40 to \$70 each, for the upgrade.

It estimates that it will cost less than \$1 per inmate to provide digital television to more than 100,000 inmates throughout the state, said Jo Ellyn Rackleff, a DOC spokeswoman.

The state plans to pay for the upgrade by using money from the same budget used to pay for schools, roads and hospitals. That budget gets revenue from inmate commissary sales, so prisoners are indirectly footing the bill for the upgrade, officials said when justifying the \$100,000 expenditure.

The Orange County Jail will use money from its commissary — which relies on sales of recreational and food items to 4,100 inmates — to upgrade 127 televisions, jail spokesman Allen Moore said.

The bill for the upgrade is nearly \$9,500, but inmates won't be tuning in to shows on ESPN, MTV or Bravo. The local jails and the state prisons don't have cable access, so inmates aren't spending their days flipping channels, Moore said.

"The TVs are controlled by each housing area's correctional officer," he said. "It is a privilege that can be taken away or granted."

The hassle of converting to digital is minimal for other local jails.

The Lake County Jail is using money from its commissary to buy one converter, which it will connect to a rooftop antenna for access to its 22 televisions, said Maj. David Mass, the jail's administrator.

The Osceola County Jail isn't converting to digital — its 1,120 inmates already have satellite television with limited channels.

The Seminole County Jail isn't spending a dime for the conversion. That's because the jail doesn't have any televisions. Lt. James Clark, a spokesman for the Seminole County Jail, said it got rid of televisions in 1995 because inmates argued about which channels to watch.

"We don't want jail to be a fun place to be. We certainly don't want them to kick their feet up," Clark said.

Rackleff said the televisions in the state's prisons aren't used for recreational purposes.

"It's necessary for the department to purchase these converters to keep the televisions in working order and to further the goals of security, orderly institutional operation and inmate rehabilitation," Rackleff said. "Eighty-eight percent of these inmates will be returning to society, and it is important for them to stay in touch with the outside world."

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**CHAIN**

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stores then.

After hearing the news Friday, neighbors Lou Yardley and Paul Moore of Casselberry quickly headed to the nearby Altamonte Springs store. "We want to see if they have bargains," Yardley said.

They won't have to wait much longer.

Liquidators will start arriving during the weekend, and closeout sales will start as early as today. Circuit City expects to shutter every store in a little more than two months.

Consumers can continue to use their gift cards at the liquidation sales, but they won't be honored after that. There will be clearance pricing, but specific discounts

were not announced Friday.

Circuit City's extended warranties are backed by third-party independent companies and will be honored, the company said, and stores in Canada will remain open.

Unlike Yardley, most customers at the Altamonte Springs store had not heard about the closing Friday afternoon. Some expressed shock and disappointment.

"That's sad, man," said Gene Himbing, 26, of Maitland. He shops at Circuit City for computer games once or twice a month. "Everything is closing down — all the stores you're familiar with."

Retail experts predict more stores will close in the wake of a recession that has sent consumers into survival mode.

The past holiday retail season was the worst in almost

40 years, with many stores seeing double-digit-percent declines in sales.

In Central Florida, the Circuit City closings will create storefronts that likely will stay empty for a considerable amount of time, one expert predicted.

"Some of the better locations will get picked up," said David Marks, president of Marketplace Advisors, a retail real-estate consulting company based in Maitland. "The problem is, there's just not that many retailers out there that are active. Everybody's just trying to figure out what's going on. Most retailers are just in a consolidation mode."

Circuit City had made many mistakes and had been weakening for some time, said Britt Beemer, Orlando-based chairman of America's Research Group, a retail-

polling firm.

"Everything you could possibly do that was wrong, they did it," he said. "It was a company that quit listening to their customers. They did what Wall Street wanted versus what the customer wanted, and now they're paying a price."

The chain still had some loyal customers, including Emanuel Davatelis of Longwood, 81, who often shops there and likes it better than rival Best Buy, the No. 1 consumer-electronics chain.

"I think these are better-trained people," he said. "They're very friendly. They seem to know more about each product. I've been very happy with these people."

Circuit City appealed to customers 35 and older, Beemer said, but the younger crowd so crucial to electronics retailers belongs to

Best Buy. Wal-Mart also cut into some of Circuit City's sales with its low-priced electronics, he added.

Charles O'Meara, president of Absolute Sound in Winter Park, said Circuit City's closing and the recent closing of many Sound Advice stores could both help and hurt his business.

"There will be some consumer distrust out there because now this is two electronics chains that have gone belly up," O'Meara said. "On the flip side, that suspicion will be with chain stores and not local business, and since we've been here almost 30 years, I think we will pick up business by default."

Etan Horowitz of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. Sandra Peditini can be reached at [speditini@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:speditini@orlandosentinel.com) or 407-420-5240.

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