

Governor Ron DeSantis' State of the State Address

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Tallahassee, Fla. – Provided below is Governor DeSantis' State of the State address as prepared for delivery.

OPENING

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the House and Senate, and fellow citizens: The Constitution requires me to “inform the legislature concerning the condition of the state” and “recommend measures in the public interest.”

It brings me great satisfaction to report on the promising prospects of our public affairs and to commend the members of the House and Senate for your efforts to make Florida successful.

- Florida's unemployment rate is near a historic low
- We have a AAA credit rating
- Florida's public university system is ranked #1 in the nation
- We are rated one of the top states in the nation for fiscal health
- Florida's crime rate is at an almost 50 year low
- And we have no state income tax

It is said that the only things certain in life are death and taxes. I'd like to suggest we append an asterisk to that statement here in Florida; no, we can't forestall Father Time, but we can say with certainty that we won't have an income tax. Or a death tax.

Last session was productive on a number of fronts, and I want to thank Speaker Jose Oliva and President Bill Galvano for their leadership.

I also would like to recognize our Lt. Gov., Jeanette Nunez, who has led on key issues ranging from health care to aerospace.

I'm also happy to have with us today our great First Lady. Casey has spearheaded her Hope for Healing initiative to tackle problems facing Floridians in the areas of mental health and substance abuse. She is making a difference – and she is only just getting started.

We are both looking forward to big things in 2020, including a new baby daughter arriving a couple weeks after session. This will be three kids ages 3 and under running around the house; chaos will officially reign supreme in our household. I can't tell you for sure how this will affect any vetoes I might issue; stay tuned.

In 2019, we took bold steps to expand educational opportunities, protect our environment and natural resources, reform health care, invest in infrastructure and bolster public safety – all while reducing taxes and adding to our budget reserves.

While we should look with favor on these bold beginnings, we have much more to do.

For everything there is a season, and this is Florida's season of opportunity – we have the chance to build on a strong foundation, the chance to face the challenges before us and the chance to leave a legacy of success that will benefit our people now and in the future.

If we work together during our season of opportunity, we can ensure that Florida works for our fellow citizens.

This will require a lot of toil and sweat and it will require not just words, but deeds. We can't rest on past accomplishments.

Our only easy day was yesterday.

Florida must remain steadfast in its commitment to low taxes and fiscal responsibility.

“For which of you intending to build a tower does not first sit down to count the cost?”

We live in an increasingly mobile and interconnected time. States cannot tax, regulate and spend with impunity without significant negative consequences.

Taxpayers flee. Businesses relocate. The economic base narrows and the state inevitably hemorrhages money. Rinse and repeat.

According to IRS figures, Florida had led the nation for six consecutive years in the amount of income – tens of billions of dollars – being brought to the state from internal migration.

People are voting with their feet, and they are leaving states with bad economic climates for the greener economic pastures of the Sunshine State.

We have the good fortune to be attracting investment and business activity and have good potential for further growth in aerospace, financial services, health care and manufacturing.

To realize this potential, Florida needs to tax lightly, spend wisely and regulate reasonably.

Maintaining fiscal health will provide the type of durable foundation required for the expansion of our economic base, which means more opportunities for the people of Florida.

When I took office I issued a sweeping executive order outlining a bold approach to protecting our natural resources, improving water quality and restoring the Everglades.

I did so in part because I believe that stewardship of our natural resources is key to our economic well-being – our water is the foundation of our tourism industry, makes Florida the top fishing and boating destination in the world and enhances our property values.

This vision required a commitment from the Legislature and you delivered – to the tune of more than \$625 million for water resources and Everglades projects.

Because Florida had skin in the game, we were able to get support from the Trump administration for another \$200 million for Everglades restoration. Ditto with the raising of the Tamiami Trail.

Key water projects are proceeding apace, including the EAA reservoir, which will be a welcome relief to so many Floridians who have been negatively impacted by things like blue-green algae.

We are even on offense against the epidemic of non-native Burmese Pythons that have ravaged the wildlife in the Everglades.

Geoff and Robbie Roestorff are with us today. They are successful bankers from southwest Florida but also double as python hunters. They and others – including more than 500 people who have registered for our Python Bowl – are helping to protect Florida’s native wildlife by removing these voracious predators from the Everglades.

Florida is in the process of realizing a vision that has been widely desired but stubbornly elusive.

We have strong momentum and need to keep it going.

We can keep it going by addressing three main areas:

First, we should fund water resource projects at the \$625 million level on a recurring basis for three years. This will provide needed certainty for these key initiatives and will help us leverage more federal support.

Second, the Legislature should pass the comprehensive water quality legislation I have proposed.

The bill represents the initial recommendations of the Blue-Green Algae task force that I launched upon taking office. It is based on sound science and provides a roadmap to reduce nutrients in our water.

Third, those that spew untreated wastewater into Florida's waterbodies need to be deterred from doing so by appropriate penalties.

Too many municipalities have failed to invest in needed upgrades to their water infrastructure in part because it is cheaper to violate the law and pay a nominal fine. This is unacceptable and needs to change.

We at the state level will also be doing our part to fortify our infrastructure in our areas most vulnerable to increased flood risks.

Over the coming months our Division of Emergency Management and Department of Economic Opportunity will be distributing more than a billion dollars in mitigation funds to areas impacted by the hurricanes over the last several years.

The bottom line is we have a chance to take bold action to make a lasting positive impact upon Florida's environment.

Let's seize this opportunity.

Over the past year, my administration has been focused on education – and for good reason.

Low taxes and a healthy business climate are important in attracting investment in Florida, but so too is our ability to produce top-flight talent – through our colleges and universities, through workforce education opportunities and through strong K-12 schools.

Florida has the top ranked public university system in the nation and has three universities in the top 50: UF in the top 10 heading for the top 5; FSU in the top 20 heading for the top 15, and USF in the top 50 heading for the top 25.

There is no question that Florida is cultivating the talent needed to power our economy to new horizons. Let's keep it going and do even better.

Traditional four-year universities aren't the only way to acquire advanced knowledge or skills – and for many it is not the best way.

Thanks to the leadership of our Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran we have launched an initiative to make Florida the nation's leader in workforce education by 2030 and, thanks to your support, we are off to a good start.

Vocational education is making a comeback in our high schools and students in districts such as Miami-Dade can graduate with industry certifications in fields like electrical and HVAC.

Apprenticeship programs also offer a great way to equip Floridians with skills that merit gainful employment.

It was either Benjamin Franklin or an ancient Confucian philosopher who once said, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

Once Floridians acquire skills it is important that they be allowed to employ those skills without unnecessary barriers placed in their way by government. Florida’s occupational licensing regime too often hinders upward mobility – often for lower income workers – because so much of the regime is based not on the legitimate goal of protecting public health and safety but on keeping people out, creating a guild that benefits insiders at the expense of those seeking to enter moderate income professions ranging from barbers to interior design.

Our citizens shouldn’t need a permission slip from the government in order to earn a living.

We have a good reform bill pending before the Legislature that made it to the 1 yard line last year. Let’s punch it in the end zone this year.

Lower-income workers also shouldn’t have their wages depressed by cheap foreign labor. Assuring a legal workforce through E-verify will be good for the rule of law, protect taxpayers, and place an upward pressure on the wages of Floridians who work in blue collar jobs.

We are a state that has an economy, not the other way around. And we need to make sure that our Florida citizens from all walks of life come first.

Our approach to K-12 education rests on (1) recruiting and retaining great teachers, (2) promoting educational choice so parents, particularly low-income parents, can place their child in a good school, and (3) measuring results through accountability.

I am recommending we take a bold step of setting a minimum salary for public school teachers at \$47,500, bringing Florida from the bottom half of states to number 2 in the nation. This will make it easier to get talented college graduates to enter the profession and will help us retain many of the good teachers we have now.

My plan will lead to a substantial pay increase for over 100,000 current teachers throughout the state. We have two of those teachers here in the chamber:

–Lindsay Beam, a 6th grade math teacher at Blountstown Middle School and Melissa Pappas, a teacher at Brookshire elementary in Orange County who works with autistic students. Both are highly effective, award-winning teachers who will see salary increases of between \$5k and \$10k.

We are also proposing to replace the Best and Brightest bonus program with a new initiative that will be more equitable – and more generous – so that we can reward our strong-performing teachers and principals.

My proposal places an emphasis on bonuses for teachers and principals in Title I schools, with bonuses available of up to \$7,500 and \$10,000, respectively.

These initiatives will build on the success we enjoyed in 2019. Last year, we faced the prospect of thousands of Florida families toiling on waiting lists for various scholarship programs.

Standing here last year, I asked the Legislature to act and you delivered.

Joining us today are Brittney and Jeremy Wilson, whose son with unique abilities, Josiah, was on the waitlist for a Gardiner scholarship. Thanks to our work in 2019, last year's waitlist was cleared and the Wilsons were able to get Josiah on a scholarship so that his educational needs can be met.

Last year, we had nearly 13,000 low-income families on the waiting list for a tax credit scholarship. Thanks to the enactment of the new Family Empowerment scholarship, these families have been liberated from the waiting list.

We have in the chamber Talethia Edwards, a mother of 7 who lives here in Tallahassee. Three of her children are now using the new family empowerment scholarship.

All Florida parents, regardless of income or zip code, should have the ability to choose the best school for their children.

This isn't limited to scholarship programs but also includes public school choice. Florida has 658 public charter schools serving 314,000 students, nearly 70% are Hispanic and African-American and 53% are low-income.

Based on the 2019 NAEP results, if Florida's charter school population was its own state, it would rank:

- #2 in the nation for 4th grade reading
- Tie for #2 in the nation for 4th grade math
- #1 in 8th grade reading and
- Tie for #5 in 8th grade math

When we increase educational choice and provide innovative learning opportunities, we can help students reach their full potential.

Results matter and accountability is needed. But the common core framework was clearly flawed.

When even parents with advanced degrees can't understand their kids' math homework, we have a problem.

Commissioner Corcoran has spent the past year working with stakeholders throughout Florida to develop a superior approach that will focus on strong standards, high-quality curriculum, streamlined testing and a renewed emphasis on American civics. We will be unveiling the new approach in the coming days.

I can reveal that one key to our replacement of Common Core will be a renewed emphasis on American civics and the US Constitution.

This means understanding the source of our rights, the theory of the Declaration of Independence, the structure of the Constitution and key amendments such as the Bill of Rights, the post-Civil War amendments and the Nineteenth Amendment.

This also means developing an appreciation for how these enduring principles animated key points in American history:

such as the fight for independence more than 240 years ago;

the leadership of President Lincoln during the civil war;

the activism of the suffragettes who succeeded in securing voting rights for women (an anniversary we celebrate this year);

the defeat of Nazi totalitarianism during WWII;

the crusade led by Dr. King for civil rights for African-Americans; and

the titanic ideological struggle against, and eventually defeat of, the tyranny represented by Soviet communism.

In his final state of the union address, President Washington said that “A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?”

Amen.

Speaking of the Constitution, when I became governor, I was charged with filling three vacancies on our Supreme Court.

In our system of government, courts play an important role, but it is a role that must remain judicial in nature; when courts exercise legislative authority, they pervert the constitution and undermine the rule of law. I was mindful of choosing justices who understood the proper role of the court is to, in Hamilton’s words, exercise “neither force nor will but merely judgment.”

I’m pleased to report that the appointments were so good that 2 of 3 have already been promoted to the US Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit.

They are both here today, Judge Barbara Lagoa and Judge Robert Luck, On behalf of the state of Florida, I congratulate you on your new post and wish you continued success.

To our remaining justices, don’t worry, reinforcements are coming soon.

With the Speaker and President leading the way, the 2019 Legislative session witnessed major reforms in the area of health care – from expanding access to telehealth to repealing antiquated regulations.

One major initiative was to provide access to cheaper prescription drugs by bringing in safe, name-brand drugs from foreign markets such as Canada. Same drug, just a much lower price.

This can only be done with federal approval and I’m happy to report that the Trump administration is moving forward with the applicable regulations. There is still a long way to go, but that we are even discussing this is a major development in this area and Florida has led the way.

I’m happy to report that the work of the Legislature in bringing transparency to health care is starting to bear fruit.

The ‘patient savings’ concept enacted last year was based on the idea that reducing health care costs requires (1) price transparency and (2) a way for patients who use information to save money.

I’m happy to report that the state of Florida has implemented a patient savings plan for its employees and has already realized millions of dollars of savings. If we can help make this type of plan widely-available throughout the state, we could see many millions of dollars in savings for patients.

Building a culture of life requires us to champion adoption, and Florida is doing better in this regard. Thanks to the hard work of Secretary Poppell and his team at the Department of Children and Families, who made a concerted effort to eliminate barriers for 3,600 children awaiting adoption, DCF

was able to reduce the number by 32%, representing more than 1,100 children who were able to find a forever home.

This was done by identifying efficiencies, engaging in collaboration with partners and stakeholders, and leveraging existing resources.

We are working hard to make the adoption process as transparent and user-friendly as possible so that every child can find a loving home.

I also hope that the parental consent bill will make its way to my desk during this session!

One other update on the last session's good work: the legislation addressing fraud and abuse of assignment-of-benefits is already producing results.

Citizen's insurance has revised its rates because of the impact of the bill, resulting in nearly 44,000 additional policyholders receiving rate decreases. The number of AOB-related lawsuits involving Citizens has dropped as well – from over 500 in June of last year to only 148 in December. Early indications are that similar effects are being observed across the private market.

The legal system is supposed to be used for redressing concrete injuries and disputes; it is not a game and shouldn't be used as such. Reforms such as AOB that improve the legal climate here in Florida are welcome.

Hurricane recovery has been a priority for my administration. In January of 2019, I asked Director Jared Moskowitz to expedite reimbursements to affected areas and the agency has distributed more than \$1.4 billion to communities impacted by hurricanes Michael, Irma, Matthew and Hermine.

The Legislature approved a \$25 million Hurricane Michael grant program for assisting with the recovery in northwest Florida.

This has been effective and has allowed us to address local needs in a nimble and targeted fashion. Sheriff Morris Young from Gadsden County and Bryon Hughes from the Mexico Beach Fire Department are in the gallery. We were able to help these areas and many others by using the grant program.

Michael was a catastrophic storm and while great progress has been made, this is a long-term effort. I ask that you re-up this grant program for another year.

We came close to getting hit with another major storm, Hurricane Dorian. It was headed for Florida, and the emergency managers throughout the state – from the county level to Jared and his team at the state level and to our federal partners at FEMA – sprang into action. We were hoping for the best, but were prepared for the worst. I thank everyone involved in the preparation for their efforts.

The storm made a 90 degree turn to the north less than 100 miles from our coast. I've never seen anything like that. I'm sure glad we made the trip to Israel last May where a number of us prayed for a hurricane-free summer. I'd be remiss if I didn't thank the Big Man upstairs for any consideration He may have had for us during that close call.

CLOSE

When Christopher Columbus set sail in 1492, his ship the Santa Maria carried the flag of Queen Isabella. The flag depicted a castle with the words “ne plus ultra” – meaning ‘nothing further’ – because at that time Spain was considered the farthest point west in the entire world.

Columbus returned and reported his discoveries in America to the queen. She immediately ordered that the flag be changed. The new flag read “plus ultra” – meaning “more out there.”

Well, in this season of opportunity, we can say there is more out there to achieve for our state – and there is no reason why we can't seize this moment and deliver for the people of Florida.

God Bless you and thank you.