



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

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Appropriations Committee Approves House Budget

This week, the Appropriations Committee passed the House's recommended budget for FY 2018-2019. Our budget continues our conservative approach of responsibly funding our state's critical needs, including significant investments in hurricane response and preparedness, education, and the opioid epidemic. The House budget also continues our commitment to tax relief by buying back the value of property value growth in the K-12 funding formula to prevent property tax increases. Finally, the budget responsibly plans for the future by placing \$3.5 billion in reserves to prepare for any unforeseen future economic uncertainty.

I believe this budget covers important elements that will positively affect all Floridians while also securing long-term budget surpluses for the future. Next week, all members of the Florida House of Representatives will vote on the budget on the House Floor.

Public Integrity & Ethics Committee Combats Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

There is no place in our capital city, our state, or the workplace for unacceptable and unwanted behavior. This was the guiding principle behind our work last session, when we placed upon ourselves the strongest ethical standards and sexual harassment policies in our body's history. And now we look to expand those reforms to the rest of the state through an amendment to HB 7007, a bill relating to state ethics. This week, the Public Integrity & Ethics Committee approved the amendment which will bring the toughest rules against sexual harassment in the nation.

Never again should one's job title or position of power shield them from accountability for this disgusting behavior. We must protect the dignity of victims and witnesses, and ensure they will not be bullied or intimidated. It is time for the culture of corruption and silence on this issue to end and people to be held accountable. I am very proud of this legislation, and look forward to keeping you updated on its progress towards becoming law.

Hope Scholarship Passes House Subcommittee

Every student deserves to learn in a safe environment. In the 2015-16 school year, over 47,000 Florida public school students were victims of incidents such as battery, bullying, harassment, hazing, physical attacks, sexual assault, battery and harassment.



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

This week, the PreK-12 Appropriations Subcommittee passed HB 1, which established The Hope Scholarship program that creates a pathway for students who are subjected to an act of violence or abuse at school to pursue their education with hope, dignity, and an opportunity for success.

These students will have the option to attend another public school in or out of their district, or an eligible private school of their choice. If the student is enrolled in a public school outside of the district, they are eligible for a transportation scholarship up to \$750. If they choose to attend a private school, they can receive a scholarship that will be funded through taxpayer donations to a scholarship funding organization by individuals who purchase or register a motor vehicle in Florida.

I support this program because it allows students to get away from an unhealthy situation and empowers parents to choose a school where their child will thrive in an environment that is conducive to learning.

House Committee Passes Criminal Justice Data Reform

This week, the Judiciary Committee passed a bill that expands the collection of criminal justice data, and brings uniformity to the data across the state. Unfortunately, the existing data collection process is either inconsistent across agencies and departments or lacking crucial information. As a result, we have been flying blind while attempting to implement criminal justice reforms.

This bill will bring Florida to the forefront of the nation in terms of criminal justice data collection. This will help us locate and diagnose trends in crime and law enforcement, while bringing unprecedented insights into policymaking. By collecting accurate, valid, and reliable data, we can accurately tailor future crime prevention legislation, creating a pathway to a safer Florida.

Military and Veterans Bill Passes House Subcommittee

This week, the Local, Federal & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee passed HB 29, which eases professional licensing fees and requirements for certain military members, veterans, and their spouses.

A military and veteran presence will forever be important to our state. These brave men and women not only place themselves in harm's way to protect our freedom and liberty, they are also a stable and significant force in Florida's growing economy.

We are grateful to those courageous Floridians who have made the selfless decision to serve our country. We will never be able to repay them for the sacrifices they have made, but in an effort to express our gratitude, the bill will provide allowances for military members, veterans, and their spouses by expanding or creating fee waivers and select regulatory waivers for a variety of professional licensees.

The bill also designates March 25 every year as "Medal of Honor Day" and allows classroom instruction related to the values of the recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor to meet certain instructional



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

requirements on character development and the contributions of veterans to our country. I believe this goes a long way towards ensuring that future generations appreciate the sacrifices made to protect our freedoms and liberties.

I support this bill and any measure that strengthens support for our military and gives them the opportunity to succeed in Florida's workforce.

House Committee Passes Bill to Crackdown on Waste, Fraud, and Abuse in Government

This week, the Public Integrity & Ethics Committee proposed a bill that dealt with government integrity. This bill will enhance government integrity by implementing mechanisms to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse. These mechanisms include creating a permanent, professional office within the Office of the Auditor General for the purpose of identifying, investigating, and recommending the elimination of waste, fraud, abuse, mismanagement and related misconduct in government. Furthermore, the bill broadens Florida's Whistle-Blower Act, ensures state agencies reward employees when they report waste, fraud, and abuse and their complaints result in savings for the state, strengthens the state procurement law, and much more.

We have shown our commitment to bringing the people of Florida the most effective, efficient, and transparent government possible. I am proud that we have continued these efforts, and I look forward to keeping you informed of the progress of this bill.

House Subcommittee Passes School District Accountability Bill

This week, the PreK-12 Appropriations Subcommittee passed HB 1279, a comprehensive bill that brings a new level of financial transparency and accountability to Florida's education spending, while also driving productivity improvements and parity between school districts.

The bill produces greater financial transparency by requiring school districts to post on their websites summary financial data regarding the efficiency of dollars spent by the district, and it requires the Department of Education to create an online tool that identifies public schools that produce high academic achievement based on per pupil spending. It also requires school districts to post summary financial information, which includes detailed information regarding the amount spent per student for instructional staff and administrative staff. The results must be reported in an easy to use format and must allow the user to performance data among schools and districts.

In addition to requiring more data reporting, the bill also takes steps to increase the financial accountability of school districts to prevent financial emergencies. HB 1279 requires large school districts



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

to employ an internal auditor, limits the amount that school board members are compensated to the amount no higher than that of first year teachers, withholds superintendent and school board salaries during a financial emergency and only until the financial emergency no longer exists, and allows for greater oversight from the Auditor General.

I believe this bill ensures that our state's public schools use your tax dollars in the most efficient and effective way possible. I am proud to support legislation that gives Florida's taxpayers the transparency and accountability they deserve from their elected officials.

House Committee passes bill to Strengthen Florida's Ban on 'Texting While Driving'

This week, the Government Accountability Committee passed HB 33, Texting While Driving, which makes the existing ban on texting, emailing, or instant messaging while driving a primary offense. Currently, law enforcement officers must detain a driver for another traffic offense in order to cite him or her for violating the ban. By making the existing ban on those activities a primary offense, law enforcement officers will be able to detain a motor vehicle operator solely for texting while driving. The bill maintains the current penalties and exceptions to the ban, and maintains that the ban does not apply to stationary motor vehicles.

The bill also includes safeguards to protect individuals' privacy rights by ensuring law enforcement officers follow certain protocols before they can access a driver's wireless communications device during a traffic stop for a violation of the ban. Finally, the bill requires law enforcement officers to record the race and ethnicity of persons cited for violating the ban on texting while driving and directs the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to compile this information and annually report the data to the Governor, President of the Senate, and Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Texting and driving presents a real, life-threatening danger to Floridians both on and off the road. I believe that providing law enforcement the ability to enforce the 'Texting While Driving' ban as a primary offense will help save lives. I'm confident that this bill strikes the appropriate balance between roadway safety and protecting our individual civil liberties. I look forward to updating you further on the progress of this bill.

Education Bill Passes House Appropriations Committee

This week, the House Appropriations Committee passed HB 7055, which is a comprehensive package of reforms that incorporates many of the bills you have seen so far this session and furthers our goal to provide a world-class education to all children in Florida.



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

The bill incorporates HB 1279 School District Accountability, HB 1 The Hope Scholarship Program and the education related provisions from HB 25 Labor Organizations and HB 29 Military and Veterans Affairs. The provisions from HB 25 in the bill include reforms to the annual public employee union registration renewal process to increase transparency and accountability for those organizations that represent instructional personnel.

A few of the provisions from HB 29 in the bill include waiving certain educator initial licensing fees and establishing a pathway for veteran officers to become certified school principals. In addition, to enhance our students understanding of the sacrifices made by our brave military men and women, March 25th of every year will be designated as “Medal of Honor Day” and Florida schools are encouraged to incorporate the significance of the Medal of Honor in classroom discussion.

The bill also increases access to quality school choice options by expanding the allowable uses of the Gardiner Scholarship, establishing Reading Scholarship accounts for struggling readers and allowing high-performing charter schools to replicate two schools, instead of one and use projected capacity to justify enrollment or grade level expansion. The bill enhances accountability of private schools participating in scholarship programs.

The bill also increases district flexibility by expanding the Principal Autonomy program statewide and allows highly trained principals, upon execution of an agreement with the district school board, to manage multiple schools. Furthermore, the bill authorizes superintendents, upon school board approval, to organize schools under an independent governing board to provide teachers with freedom to teach and meet the academic needs of students.

Other polices in the bill include providing the Commissioner with authority to coordinate resources during an emergency; removing provisions providing funding for dual enrollment textbooks for home education students private schools to pay colleges for dual enrollment; requiring the administration of paper based English and language arts and math assessments for grades 7-8; and providing Florida Virtual School students access to district testing facilities.

I support this bill because I believe this comprehensive package of reforms will create transformational change in Florida’s educational system and ensures a bright future for generations to come.

Florida House Committee examines Agriculture-Related Hurricane Tax Credit

This week, the Ways & Means Committee discussed recommendations from the Select Committee on Hurricane Response & Preparedness on the creation of Agriculture-related tax relief for our state’s Agriculture Industry that was negatively impacted by Hurricane Irma.

The committee had a productive discussion focusing on various agriculture relief measures relating to fencing and building materials, agricultural transportation, and idled packing and processing facility equipment.



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

First, tax relief on fencing and building materials would refund state and local sales tax paid on fencing materials used on farms and building materials for non-residential farm buildings. This would apply to taxes paid between Sept. 10, 2017 and May 31, 2018.

Second, tax relief on agriculture transportation would refund state and local fuel taxes applied to fuel used to transport agricultural products from the farm sight to the initial stage of processing or packing and would apply to taxes paid between Sept. 10, 2017 and June 30, 2018.

Third, tax relief on packing and processing facility tangible personal property would allow machinery and equipment operated by a citrus fruit packing or process facility to be valued at salvage value, for property tax purposes, as long as it is idled as a result of Hurricane Irma crop damage or citrus greening.

I strongly support the committee's efforts to spur discussion on a Hurricane-related tax relief for Florida's agriculture industry and believe this is a good first step in preparing our state for the next storm.

Campus Free Expression Act Passes House Subcommittee

This week, the Civil Justice & Claims Subcommittee passed HB 909, which provides stronger protections for free-speech on the campuses of public institutions of higher learning.

The right to speak freely and openly is one of our most iconic and fundamental rights as Americans. Currently, many campuses restrict outdoor free speech to just a few specified locations on campus known as "free speech zones." The bill prohibits public institutions of higher education from unreasonably restricting outdoor free speech on campuses and allows spontaneous free speech in any outdoor area of campus so long as that speech does not disrupt the functioning of those institutions.

Additionally, the bill gives the Attorney General and/or individuals who have had their right to free speech wrongfully curtailed, the right to sue an institution for damages, court costs, and attorney's fees.

I took an oath to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and I am proud to support this legislation, which takes concrete steps to safeguard one of our most sacred Constitutional rights.

House Subcommittee Passes Interruption of Services Bill

On Monday, the Energy & Utilities Subcommittee passed HB 971, which increases consumer protection for customers of cable companies, landline telephone companies, and garbage pickup companies.

Currently, if services from cable companies, landline telephone companies, and garbage pickup companies are interrupted, they are under no obligation to prorate their customers' bills and customers are often charged for services that they are unable to use. The bills seeks to correct this by requiring these



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

companies to prorate their customers' bills, if services have been interrupted for longer than 24 hours for cable companies and landline telephone companies, or 4 days for garbage pickup companies.

The bill also allows customers to end their month-to-month service plans at any time during their billing cycle and requires cable and telecommunications to disconnect services and prorate their customer's bill to only charge them for the time their service was active.

I support this bill because I believe hard working Floridians should not be charged for a service they are not receiving if it is through no fault of their own.

House Civil Justice and Claims Subcommittee Passes Reforms to the Judicial Nomination Process

This week, the Civil Justice & Claims Subcommittee passed HB 753, which revises the process for selecting members of a Judicial Nominating Commission (JNC). A JNC is the body that nominates judges to fill openings in courts, who are then ultimately appointed by the Governor. Four of the nine members of each of the twenty-six JNCs are nominated by The Florida Bar, a private organization that exists outside of the democratic process, and away from the public's watchful eye.

HB 753 will remove The Florida Bar from the process and give two JNC appointments each to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. History has shown us that decisions made under public scrutiny are less likely to be made for self-serving reasons. Requiring the members of this important commission to be selected by public officials rather than a private body will produce greater results for the process, and will strengthen the crucial principle of checks and balances embedded in our government.

I look forward to continuing to work towards greater transparency and accountability in all levels of government and will continue to update you on the progress of this bill.

Florida House Committee Votes to Prohibit Health Care Claim Denial

This week the Health Innovation Subcommittee passed HB 217 to prohibit health insurers and health maintenance organizations (HMO) from retroactively denying claims.

When a patient misses a health insurance premium payment, the patient has a grace period in which to make the late payment – usually 30 days. During that time, the policy remains in effect. But if a patient continues to fail to pay the premium, the contract will be terminated. Sometimes a patient seeks services during that grace period. If the insurance contract is later terminated for non-payment, the patient becomes ineligible for coverage back to the start of the grace period, and the insurer may deny the health care provider's claims for services provided during the grace period. This is a type of retroactive claim denial.



HOUSE MAJORITY OFFICE

FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



REPRESENTATIVE RAY RODRIGUES, MAJORITY LEADER

In this instance of a retroactive denial, the health care provider may have already verified that the patient was eligible for coverage at the time, provided services based on that verification, and in some cases already received payment. Retroactive denials can result in the provider or the patient covering the loss, despite the verified eligibility.

HB 217 provides certainty of payment for providers. When the insurer confirms a patient's eligibility for coverage during a grace period, and a service is provided, the insurer or HMO must cover the claim – regardless of whether the patient is later determined to be ineligible for coverage.

Under the bill, this prohibition on retroactive denial would apply to insurance policies and HMO contracts entered into or renewed on or after January 1, 2019, and does not apply to Medicaid HMOs which must conform to a different standard in federal law.

Your Florida House is dedicated to passing legislation that will increase access to quality and affordable health care for all Floridians, as well as, protecting them. I strongly support the efforts of the Florida House to pass policies that will bring an end to the practice of retroactively denying the health care claims of Floridians.

Fix to Florida's Policy on Open Carry Passes Criminal Justice Subcommittee

This week, the Criminal Justice Subcommittee passed HB 39, which clarifies the application of the state's laws prohibiting open carry. Current law does not differentiate between a person with a concealed weapons license and a person without a license with regard to the prohibition on open carry of a firearm. As a result, people are being charged with crimes for the accidental and unintentional exposure of their concealed weapon.

This bill lowers the penalty for a temporary and unintentional exposure of a concealed weapon by a concealed weapon permit holder for their first and second offenses. It also affirms that a person is not violating the ban on open carry if their concealed firearm is temporarily visible. This will allow us to stop criminalizing law-abiding individuals for harmless accidents. I support this bill because it protects citizens' Second Amendment rights, and I look forward to updating you as the bill progress through the legislative process.