

Opening Day Speech - 2014
House Speaker Will Weatherford
Tuesday, March 4, 2014
Remarks As Prepared

Welcome back to our final Session.

If you kept my gift from Organizational Session, the countdown clock, you'll note that there are 245 days left.

But for all practical purposes, we're in the final 60 days of what I hope will mark a productive, meaningful, and policy-focused second half.

And so today, we gather together in this chamber.

A Chamber that the casual observer might say is just one big room with 120 desks, 47 Speaker portraits, 10 historic murals placed in 5,871 square feet of carpet, concrete, and wood. Thankfully, only 1 dais.

This House, the Florida House, is a special place.

And each of us is privileged to be here.

To serve, to represent the millions of Floridians who sent us here to work for them.

A little later this morning we are going to receive the "State of the State" from our Governor, Governor Scott.

As he will outline very clearly, Florida has been on an upward climb for three years because unemployment, taxes and regulation are on the decline.

We are grateful for the Governor's leadership.

And while we have much to be thankful for, we also have much to do. I've spent time with many of you and have heard, with great interest your individual stories about why you chose to serve here.

As I prepared for this day, I too was reminded of my decision.

I doubt anyone in this room decided to run to seek fame or glory. There are easier ways to do that. All you need today is a camera phone and a YouTube account.

No, you ran because you wanted to do something.

To change something.

To bring something to this Chamber that otherwise never would have happened, had you not been here.

You probably now know that this can sometimes be a challenging place to realize that dream.

It is a place where the will of one cannot be accomplished without the consent of the majority.

It is a furnace for ideas – a melting pot of opinions and viewpoints. It's the way our Founders so elegantly designed the structure of our government.

Not as an empire of I, but as a republic of we.

Our best and greatest accomplishments – both last year, and in the history of our state and country, have occurred when we worked together.

When we consider views not only from our own perspective, but from the perspective of all Floridians.

Our modern political environment does not lend itself to such an approach. For example, in Washington, DC, they pass far more blame than bills.

Let's set a different tone by spending the next 60 days focused on policy, not politics.

Let's hold off on campaigning until May 3rd.

Let's show Florida how it can be done.

Last year we announced and accomplished a significant agenda.

Many thought we couldn't or wouldn't succeed. And there certainly were moments where I wondered myself. But when the votes were counted and the handkerchief dropped, we delivered for Florida.

And Rep. McBurney, we even managed to pass your 224-page bill.

In the end we pursued – and achieved – an inclusive agenda of reform.

It is my hope that we will do so again, and that together we will finish this Session strong.

That's why, once again, we have worked with the Senate to create a Florida Work Plan for 2014.

It's more ambitions and far reaching than last year.

In fact, we will begin this day by passing our first Work Plan bill – the Florida G.I. Bill. We have long been known as a military- and veteran-friendly state.

It's a distinction of honor for us – and one where we should always look for ways to do even better.

If we want to make Florida a pocket of personal and economic freedom for the nation and the world, then what better way to start this Session than honoring those who fight for that very freedom?

If this Session we make Florida the best place for our military, we will also do everything we can to make it the worst place for predators and criminals.

This year, we will have sweeping reforms to our sexual predator laws.

We will also provide safe places to victims of human trafficking, we'll fully fund the APD "critical needs waiting list" and make significant investments in our Guardian Ad Litem Program and Child Advocacy Centers.

Let me say clearly that one death – even one single death - of a child under the care of the state is completely unacceptable.

Together – with DCF, the House, the Senate, advocates, and families, we will increase funding and decrease cumbersome and dangerous red tape.

While the state cannot prevent every tragedy we can do more to protect Florida’s children.

Members, this Session, we are going to cut taxes. A lot of taxes. In fact, this will be the single largest general revenue tax cut in over 10 years.

Chair Workman has a big job – We are looking to return \$500 million dollars back into the pockets of our taxpayers. It’s our version of a real stimulus plan – one that is good for Florida’s families and Florida’s economy.

We will continue to put our House in order. Once again, Senate President Gaetz is leading the charge on ethics reform.

Today, with your vote, we will pass a residency rule.

The people of Florida need to know that their political leaders are playing by the rules. Our Constitution says that members must live in their districts.

The trust of the people is the very foundation of our representative government.

And we’ll take other practical steps to make government more accountable to Floridians - from a comprehensive IT bill to another balanced budget.

Speaking of fiscal responsibility, last year, we put 500 million recurring dollars in the budget to shore up our so-called “great” pension system.

Nowhere but government do we rejoice and say, “we can almost pay all of our bills.” An 85.9 percent funded plan sounds great, until you realize that’s over 21 billion dollars of unfunded liability.

Members, I believe if we can solve the problem this year, then in future years we have more money to hire more teachers, to reduce more taxes, and invest more in our infrastructure.

May 2014 finally be the year that we disarm this ticking time bomb and secure a better future for our workers and our state. And the final focus of our Work Plan this session is a concentrated effort on fostering upward mobility and disrupting Generational Poverty.

1 in 5 of our fellow Floridians are living under the poverty level. That is unacceptable to me and it should be to each of us, regardless of our party.

Now, there will always poverty – the kind that results from temporary setbacks: job loss, foreclosures or unexpected challenges.

But there's a far greater and more dramatic problem for some of our Floridians.

They're stuck in generational poverty – the persistent, year after year oppression and hopelessness that starts with grandparents, is passed on to parents and continues to their children.

I believe strong families, a quality education and a good paying job are the only ways to disrupt poverty – particularly when it's generational.

The statistics are overwhelming – If you have a full time job in this country today, there is a 97-percent chance that you are not in poverty.

If you have a fulltime job or a part-time job, there is a 93-percent chance you are not living in poverty.

While our unemployment is dropping, there are still too many Floridians looking for work.

For example, if you are a young person between the ages of 16 and 24, your unemployment rate is 15 percent.

We live in a society where our next generation cannot pay their student loans. They are not saving for retirement. They aren't buying homes, they're moving back home.

There is a storm brewing that is easier to ignore than address.

But we must act.

The answer is a paycheck – not a welfare check – that’s the ticket to economic and personal freedom.

Because a job is more than just pay. Work gives us a sense of dignity. Of self-actualization. Of purpose.

If dependency is the deep pit of quicksand, education and the free enterprise system are the hands that pull us out.

But in order to provide sustainable, lasting solutions, we must get beyond the tired and ineffective arguments of income inequality and class warfare. We have to quit dividing.

Because what we know to be true is that it’s not the redistribution of wealth that will restore the rungs on the ladder of opportunity, it’s the redistribution of knowledge.

Therefore, we will put significant time and energy into fostering economic opportunity through education.

Just as there is no single cause for this problem, so too we will not offer a single solution. We will attack it on many fronts.

From increased standards and accountability in our early learning efforts to common sense reforms in our K-12 system.

We’ll simplify school grades to make them more understandable, and thus more meaningful to parents, teachers and children.

And we will also work to make sure that children and their parents who are looking for an alternative learning environment will not be turned away.

No child’s future success should be dictated by their zip code. In my opinion, no other issue today personifies freedom, opportunity and the God-given “right to rise” for our children better than the school choice movement!

There are 60,000 kids who are receiving scholarships today, primarily minority and overwhelmingly low-income. And there are tens of thousands more whose parents are longing to send them to the school of their choice.

Let us agree not to fight each other and instead fight for them. Let us expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

Florida has been a leader in career and professional education, and by funding tech centers and offering more industry certification programs we will create real competition and offer real choices.

Florida's workforce needs are changing at a dynamic and rapid pace. We are requiring our education system to adapt and innovate.

We are also changing the higher education paradigm: requiring universities to focus on helping students get a job, not just a framed degree.

By creating an incentive-based funding model, we will reward universities for efficiency, degree completion, and job placement.

Members, this is our Work Plan for 2014. It's a big agenda, but it can be done. Yet, it's not the totality of what we'll accomplish this Session. As I look around the room, I see a chamber that is full of ideas.

I look forward to the conversation on other priorities that are important to you – priorities that are important to our state.

And before I close, I want to tell you about one more.

Members, we need to put higher education in reach for a group of students that we are leaving behind.

The federal government has failed.

Washington, DC, has ducked the issue of immigration to the detriment of the states.

Our border is not secure.

Our laws are not enforced.

Their flaws and avoidance have left us with inconsistency and confusion. It's hurting our state. It's hurting some of our kids.

There are children, through no fault of their own, who live in our state, are educated in our public schools, and yet after investing tens of thousands of dollars to educate them, we shut the door on their future. We no longer treat them as Floridians.

It makes no sense fiscally.

It makes no sense economically.

And it makes no sense morally – because we should never punish a child for the mistakes of their parents.

States do not have control over immigration policy, but we can act on residency. Let's exercise our state's rights and open the door of opportunity for all of Florida's children.

In 1984, Florida author Patrick Smith wrote the remarkable novel entitled, *A Land Remembered*. He just passed away in January.

But his book chronicles over one hundred years of Florida history through the lives of a family of pioneers.

Though the characters were a matter of fiction, Smith captured so exquisitely the very real character of our state.

Historical accounts are of great value. They remind us that we are both blessed and burdened by the choices and actions of our predecessors. Our state is the reality of *their* vision.

But *A Land Remembered* is what you see in the rearview mirror.

It is up to us – all of us – to help write the next volume of this incredible Florida story.

My sincere hope is that, as your Speaker, I will help make this next 60 days worthy of your sacrifice.

And that together we will write a story worthy of passing on to the next generation.

If we set aside ambition and campaigning – even just for a few months.

If we focus on Floridians who are counting on us.

Floridians who are looking for a chance to rise.

Then, I believe our best days are ahead.

Let us make Florida not just a Land Remembered.

But a Land of Promise.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the Great State of Florida.

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