

Tallahassee Lassie....And Friends

The Florida State Constitution dictates that the legislature must be in session 30 working days. And so, it convened this session March 10, 2017. Gideon Tucker once wisely said, "No man's life, liberty, or property are safe while the Legislature is in session." That may be truer now more than ever!

A few days in Tallahassee can be both invigorating and exhausting, as I found out during its second week. Speaking truth to power is never easy, but as we discovered, it can be rushed, reduced to a sound byte and a photo op. There were a dozen of us retirees from the education professions tasked with asking our elected officials to "1) support public education by fully funding it 2) allow teachers to manage their responsibilities without micromanagement 3) hold educators, including those at charter schools, to the same standards of accountability 4) keep the promise of the FRS". The organization, the Florida Retired Educators Association (FREA) promotes awareness and civic responsibility.



Ed Stanford FREA Dist 1 legislative Chair, Sen. Bill Monford, Felicia Bruce RC 43 VP & Dist 9 FREA Legislative Chair, & Roger Cuevas FREA President



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Impressions: Everyone in Tallahassee wants something! The corridors of power were filled every day. Some were military personnel being honored. Some were special needs children and the adults who care for them. Some were older retired folks like ourselves. Others were easily recognizable as professional lobbyists because they wore thousand dollar suits or carried designer handbags.

The lobbyists are ever present throughout the session; the advocates, like ourselves have a day or two to plead their cases and fight for a shrinking piece of the state budget to fund their worthwhile endeavors.

BILLS, BILLS, BILLS.... The ambitious House has about 1800 bills proposed whereas the Senate has less than half that. In order to become law, bills come out of committee with a recommendation, then both houses have to agree on the intent and format of a bill, reconcile its wording, and submit it to the Governor for his signature. Most bills die long before that process is complete. Here is a partial list of what is happening:

19 gun bills ALL of which expand gun rights, have the backing of the NRA; Steube and Combee are the most prolific authors; HB 779, 849 are just two examples

hurt unions: by desertification SB 1292, HB 11; weaken or neutralize all unions except firefighters, police and prison officers

micromanage education: HB 773 (changes the dates of testing but NOT the amount); SB 374 will affect higher education budgets; state colleges targeted for $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Senate plan to trim \$131M; school religious expression expansion (favoring Christian students) HB 303; SB 436 worse

HB 1305 & SB 1236 would give protections to school district whistle blowers

Other bills to force school districts to share tax \$ with charters for maintenance, test school drinking water to determine lead content, mandatory recess break

HB 591: class size

HB 781: designation of school grades

HB 827: Teacher bonuses

HB 79: struggling readers

HB 293: Middle School study

HB 1111: helps charter school teachers

SB 392: High school graduation requirements

Best & Brightest: expansion proposals

bills to micromanage local government: several legislators want to restrict the rights of cities and counties in areas such as contract wages, zoning, driving companies (Uber/Lyft..), seasonal rentals

expansion of rights: restoration of ex-felons' rights, bills proposing legislation through a process similar to the state's ballot initiative procedure...

Everglades Restoration: contentious and hotly debated

beach restoration: projects in search of funding and funding hometown projects that total \$2.6B 'pork' that has little oversight

LGBT rights bill

criminalize protests: Senator Gainer wants to make it illegal

criminal justice reform: change misdemeanor offenses to civil citations for kids

judicial reform: many bills; some allow judicial discretion others limit powers, make judges run for office/subject to judicial review and oversight, one of which would have judges explain to Gov and Leg why rulings take so long; new death penalty rules

transparency & sunshine: bill to allow officials to hold private meetings, others make accessing public records more difficult; Scott is trying to remove the Sunshine from the Sunshine Laws; legislators trying to make selection of university presidents a secret process

help utilities, hurt consumers: bills to end run court rulings that favored consumers

Elect the FL Secretary of State: proposed constitutional amendment

changes to workman's compensation:

medical marijuana: stalled in committee for two months or more

state tax \$ to be used to upgrade pro sports stadiums

Backstory: The legislature, governor's mansion and hence, appointments to the judiciary, have been Republican controlled in Florida for two decades. The House has always tended to be more ambitious and conservative than its counterpart, the Senate. Besides the Governor (Scott), the Lt. Governor (Cantera), Attorney General (Biondi), Chief Financial Officer (Atwater) and Commissioner of Agriculture (Putnam) are all Republicans. Such total control over the levers of power has not resulted in harmony; there is serious discord, especially between the governor and the legislature.

Currently Joe Negron is the President of the Senate and Richard Corcoran is the Speaker of the House, both Republicans. There are 29 state agencies and organizations controlled by the Republican Party. There are 20 NEW Senators (half Democrats) and 44 NEW House members (22 of whom are Democrats) BUT the Republicans are still in the majority in BOTH chambers. Although all of the same party, there is great division between and among even the legislators! Nowhere is this clearer than in the appropriations committees where the House is proposing dramatic cuts to education and the Senate is considering ways to increase funding. Colleges and universities across the state would be affected as well K-12 programs.

There is a Constitutional Revision beginning which is mandated by the FL Constitution. Hearings will be held around the state. Corcoran appointed Tom Lee, Chris Sprowls, Darryl Rouson and Chris Nocco to the Constitution Revision Commission (CRC). The powerful committee has a decidedly conservative bent and is expected to advocate for his top priorities: education reform and limitations on 'overreach' by the FL Supreme Court. John Stemberger, noted anti-LGBT conservative is also on the CRC.