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Passidomo Opening Day Remarks

Mar 7, 2023

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TALLAHASSEE — Senate President Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, made remarks to the Senate on the opening day of the 2023 legislative session. Here are her remarks, as prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome to the start of the 2023 regular session.

Senators, we are fortunate that many of our state's leaders are with us in the chamber this morning to celebrate the start of the session.

Gov. DeSantis is not with us, as he is preparing his State of the State address, which we all look forward to hearing shortly. Our governor is truly America's governor. He has defended our conservative values, challenged the individuals and institutions who pose threats to others, and introduced innovative solutions to better our state. It is often said that states are laboratories for democracy. Under the leadership of Gov. DeSantis, Florida is more than a laboratory, we are the model.

Lt. Gov. Nunez, a friend from our days in the House. Thank you for being here. Our Cabinet members – General Moody, CFO Patronis and our own Senate family member, Commissioner-President Simpson. Thank you all for your partnership in the executive branch.

I am honored that all of our Supreme Court justices are with us this morning. I do not recall another opening day when every justice was able to join us. We know government is at its best when all three branches work in concert, respecting the unique constitutional role of the other

branches. It is a testament to our system that we all gather together today to celebrate the opening of the 2023 legislative session.

Thank you especially to my counterpart in the Legislature, Speaker Paul Renner, who will gavel in the House of Representatives later this morning. We have a common vision and share many of the same priorities for our great state. We are working in lockstep to deliver meaningful legislation for the benefit of all Floridians.

And then there is my partner in life, John Passidomo, Florida's first-First Gentleman. Thank you for keeping me focused and grounded, and for all your support for the last 43 years.

Many of you have asked about my dad. As you know, he turned 100 on New Year's Day. He is doing well and is watching these proceedings from home on the Florida Channel as are my daughters, Catarina and Francesca, while Gabriella is across the city in a Public Service Commission meeting.

To all of our former presidents and senators, to all the families and special guests here today, and to those who send their greetings and well-wishes from afar — your encouragement means a great deal to me, personally, and I know I speak for the entire Senate when I say that we are uplifted by your prayers, advice, and support.

Senators, this opening day feels a little different. It seems like we have already been “open” for quite a while. But this opening day is an opportunity for us to remind ourselves why we are here. We are here to serve the people of Florida. Each of us represents more than 560,000 Floridians in our district. They are the reasons we are here, and it is our responsibility to carry their voices to Tallahassee.

On every senator's desk this morning is a book we compiled together. I challenged each of you to submit a landmark from your district, something symbolic and meaningful to you and your constituents. This book is a collection of those Florida icons, and it really is such a great representation of our state.

It features a wide range of geographic points, from the first forts that defended our land to the southernmost point of the continental United States. It highlights our state's cultural history and diversity with places like the Little Haiti Cultural Center and the Wells' Built Museum. In it, you will find examples of early commerce like the Stranahan House in Fort Lauderdale or the

Ted Smallwood store in Chokoloskee, and modern attractions like the Daytona Beach International Speedway and Monty's Raw Bar, which together attract visitors to our state from around the globe.

You will see symbols that represent the promise of America, from the Freedom Tower in Miami that gave hope to tens of thousands of Cubans fleeing communism and oppression, to Southern Command and MacDill Air Force Base, which serve as a strategic center of operations to protect our freedom around the globe. There are two schools and a college where students learned to read and developed skills for a future career, and a historic hospital that introduced modern health care to Florida in the early 1900s.

There's an old lighthouse that used to guide sailors home safely on dark nights, and two memorials to fallen Floridians who gave their lives in service to our state and nation. There are also many, many examples of our beautiful natural resources, parks, springs, coastlines and the Everglades, which we have all worked so hard to revitalize, protect and preserve for future generations of Floridians and visitors to our state. These 40 pages are a microcosm of the Florida story. A sliver of the many, many iconic places that make Florida unique. I hope these pages serve as a guide for us this legislative session and beyond.

These are the reasons we are here. We must advance policies that protect our people and our places — what makes Florida so special. We must hold others accountable when they threaten our people and our values. Although we may disagree with one another at times, know that we are each fighting for the needs and interests of our districts, and for the future of Florida. And, we will do this together.

We've already hit the ground running with a handful of special sessions to address time-sensitive needs. I am grateful to my colleagues for your support in our state's hurricane recovery. We've already passed legislation to provide tax relief to owners of homes destroyed by Hurricanes Ian and Nicole. We provided housing assistance to displaced Floridians. We created a bridge loan program for local governments, and we invested significant funding for reconstruction of infrastructure.

Our select committee, led by Leader Albritton, has put forward additional legislation by Sen. Martin to strengthen our state's resilience and to help our state prepare for and defend against future storms.

Tomorrow, we will take up comprehensive legislation to create more attainable housing options for all Floridians. Sen. Calatayud's Live Local Act is geared to help Floridians at every income level and stage of life find an affordable, convenient place to live, work and raise their families. We have heard input from many senators and from many stakeholders, and we've incorporated your feedback in crafting this bill.

With this legislation all of the families, workers, law enforcement officers, teachers and so many others who are flocking to Florida from high-tax, lockdown states can live conveniently close to the communities they serve. I am confident this legislation will pass tomorrow with overwhelming support. And governor, expect to see it on your desk very soon.

This week, we will also take up legislation by Sen. Brodeur to expand access to Florida's wildlife corridor. It is critical that we protect Florida's natural landscape, and the resources and wildlife that live within it. Expanding access to the corridor will enable Floridians to walk, run, and bike through it furthering appreciation for the natural beauty of Florida. I believe this will be Florida's Central Park. And, it will be a legacy we can be proud to leave for future generations of Floridians and visitors to enjoy.

Senators, at the end of this week, we will have accomplished a great deal. But, there is much more work to do. As I predicted during the organizational session, we will have late nights and long weeks this session.

We will make school choice a reality for every child in every family across our great state. We must invest in the education of every Florida student, no matter where they choose to go to school.

We will cut red tape on traditional public schools. These institutions — which have served our communities for generations — will have a meaningful opportunity to compete right alongside other school choice options.

We will enhance public safety by codifying the constitutional right of citizens to keep and bear arms. At the same time, we will expand tools available to law enforcement and educators working to keep our communities and schools safe.

We will promote career and technical education with a focus on work-based learning opportunities linked to local employment.

We will work to secure our borders because the federal government has failed to do so.

We are going to cut taxes on more essential items so Florida families can keep more of their hard-earned dollars where they belong — in their pockets. This includes making certain tax cuts permanent — like the diaper tax, as Leader Book as advocated.

And we're going to pass meaningful tort reform to curb the practices of those attorneys who file frivolous lawsuits which increase the cost of living in our state.

Our work will not be done in a silo. Like the Live Local Act, we are inviting input from all senators and stakeholders so that the laws we pass from this chamber are as good as they can be. We are working with sheriffs on school and community safety; with superintendents, schools and parents on education; with our partners on the local level; and, with the many organizations throughout the state who also serve our communities.

This is the thoughtful, deliberative process that has guided our chamber throughout Florida's history, and we can all be proud to be a part of this rich legislative tradition. At the root of it all is the people we serve. They are the reasons we are here.

Look to your book. Look to the iconic symbols that make our state great. Look to the reasons why we prosper. Look to the values that we hold dear. When you are lost in the dark, look to the lighthouse to lead you back to safety. If we do this, remember the reasons why we are here, then we will each have a successful session to report back to our constituents at home.

I shared a Winston Churchill quote with Speaker Renner earlier this morning, which I think reflects well on the work ahead this session.

“These are not dark days. These are great days — the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race.”

Senators, the eyes of the nation are on Florida this year. Let's show America how it's done.