

DESANTIS STATE OF THE STATE

March 2, 2021

NSF Staff

TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Ron DeSantis gave his State of the State address Tuesday to formally start the 2021 legislative session. Here are his remarks, as prepared for delivery:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, members of the House and Senate and fellow citizens:

I see, in many parts of our country, a sad state of affairs: schools closed, businesses shuttered and lives destroyed.

This calamitous reality is just the beginning of what will likely be long-term damage to children, families and society.

Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind.

While so many other states kept locking people down, Florida lifted people up.

Florida's schools are open — and we are one of only a handful of states in which every parent has a right to send a child to school in-person.

All Floridians have a right to earn a living — and our citizens are employed at higher rates than those in the nation as a whole.

Every job is essential.

If you are working hard to earn a living, we got your back in the state of Florida.

Every business in Florida has a right to operate. We have stood up for small, family-owned businesses and have saved thousands of them from ruin.

Because of our actions, Florida is leading the nation in the number of people submitting business formation applications and we are one of the top destinations for business relocation.

Friends, legislators, Floridians, lend me your ears: We will not let anybody close your schools, we will not let anybody take your jobs and we will not let anybody close your businesses!

One year ago, COVID-19 had not yet been declared a global pandemic. We had scant knowledge of the virus, little ability to test for it, and no approved treatments.

Today, we have three safe and effective vaccines, great treatments like monoclonal antibodies, and the ability to conduct rapid diagnostic tests.

A lot has happened over the past year.

To honor those who have died with COVID and to recognize the toll the virus has taken on family members, the state of Florida will be lowering the flags to half-staff on Wednesday.

We thank the health care professionals throughout Florida who cared for those who became ill due to COVID. This includes front-line doctors and nurses, who provided top-notch care to hospitalized patients, as well as staff at long-term care facilities who worked tirelessly to protect our most vulnerable seniors.

Their efforts helped to save thousands of lives and are a major reason why Florida, with perhaps the most vulnerable population to COVID, has per capita COVID mortality that is below the national average.

From the outset, Florida has been steadfast in focusing efforts on the protection of the elderly. We rejected the policy of sending contagious COVID patients back into nursing homes; indeed, we prohibited the practice. Florida also established COVID-only nursing facilities so that infections in long-term care facilities could be more effectively contained.

And perhaps most importantly, we are prioritizing our senior citizens for vaccinations. Florida is putting seniors first because it is the best strategy to save lives and is the best way to honor our elders from whom we draw inspiration. We have vaccinated millions of seniors throughout Florida — parents, grandparents, veterans of the second world war, survivors of the Holocaust.

We have made vaccinations available all across the state: in retail pharmacies including Publix, Walmart and CVS, at hundreds of hospitals throughout Florida, at drive-thru sites in places like The Villages retirement community, at houses of worship from the First Baptist Church Piney Grove in Lauderdale Lakes to the St. Paul AME in Jacksonville, at senior communities such as Century Village and Kings Point in South Florida, and in underserved areas such as Pahokee.

We even have delivered thousands of shots to homebound seniors in the comfort of their own homes.

Our efforts saved lives. In fact, 40 states have suffered higher COVID mortality for seniors aged 65-plus on a per-capita basis than Florida.

And the cases and hospitalizations for seniors in Florida have plummeted as vaccinations have increased — since Jan. 30, the number of seniors hospitalized for COVID has declined by 80% and cases among seniors have declined by 71%.

Florida was right to prioritize the elderly. Seniors first works.

As we worked to protect seniors, we also worked to give opportunities to our kids. Florida has led the way in providing all parents the right to send their kids to school for in-person instruction. Florida is one of only four states — and the only large state — to offer in-person instruction to 100% of its students.

Across the nation, millions of students have been locked out of the classroom for nearly a year — and for many there is no end in sight. These students have fallen behind on academics, have been denied the opportunity to participate in activities such as athletics, and have seen their social development stunted.

The failure of so many places outside of Florida to open schools at the beginning of the school year will go down as one of the biggest policy blunders of our time.

Florida did not make that mistake. We followed the data and stood by our parents and students. We ignored the political posturing and fear-mongering and did what was right for Floridians.

Florida has succeeded where so many other states have failed in providing opportunities for its students in large measure because of the tireless efforts of school superintendents, administrators, teachers and coaches. They knew keeping kids out of school would be a disaster and were not going to let that happen on their watch.

On behalf of a grateful state and millions of grateful parents, thank you.

Given the unique circumstances we faced, you may never have an opportunity to play such a crucial role in ensuring opportunities for students as well as in preventing long-term damage to society.

Open schools have been a godsend to parents throughout Florida, especially for single moms responsible for putting food on the table.

Economic lockdowns are a luxury of the largely affluent Zoom class; many Floridians cannot do their jobs over a computer; they need to show up.

Over the past many months, Florida has led the way in protecting the jobs and livelihoods of its hard-working citizens — from construction workers to bartenders, from servers to hair stylists, everyone has a right to earn a living.

Florida's efforts have made a lasting impact on the lives of millions of people. But do not take it from me. Let them tell you for themselves:

There are not a whole lot of Floridians who are itching to move from Florida to lockdown states, but there are thousands and thousands of people who are seeking to leave the lockdowns behind for the greener pastures in Florida.

We have long been known as the Sunshine State — but, given the unprecedented lockdowns we have witnessed in other states, I think the Florida sun now serves as a beacon of light to those who yearn for freedom.

As we begin this legislative session, I look forward to working with Senate President Wilton Simpson and House Speaker Chris Sprowls. You both have already demonstrated leadership on issues that matter to Floridians and I know you will be great partners for progress.

When the initial fallout from COVID began, there was a lot of concern about whether we could afford to continue with the progress we have already made on priorities like protecting our water resources and K-12 education.

Forecasts were dire. The 2021 legislative session was shaping up to be a fiscal nightmare.

As many of you are probably aware, when the pandemic hit, I vetoed \$1 billion from this year's budget. I also instructed our executive agencies not to spend all of the appropriated funds because we did not know for sure how much revenue we would be taking in.

Because Florida's economy is open, revenue is coming in at levels far higher than even the most recent revised estimates. For the last three months — December to February — preliminary estimates peg the increase in revenue at more than \$800 million over and above the December revenue estimation.

Florida is below the national average in unemployment and much lower than our peer states of Texas, New York and California. We also anticipate downward revisions of December's unemployment numbers to reflect even stronger jobs numbers.

As international travel is reinstated and tourism picks up (and I hope the federal government will allow our cruise ships to sail again), the employment outlook should improve even more.

Throughout the pandemic, Florida has not touched one red cent from our rainy day fund.

The bottom line is that we saved Florida's economy and as a result our budget outlook is positive.

The priorities we've championed — from water resources to education to infrastructure — can be honored.

Let us get it done.

I reject reductions in funding for K-12 education. Last session, the Legislature answered my call to increase the average minimum salary for teachers, taking Florida from the bottom half of states to the top 5. Let us keep this momentum going — let us do more this year!

We should not forget that Florida continues to make great strides in K-12 education.

Just last week, the College Board released data showing that Florida ranks No. 2 in the nation in the percentage of graduating seniors who have passed Advanced Placement exams.

Florida leads the nation in school choice.

We are beginning to place a strong – and long overdue – emphasis on vocational education.

Florida has launched an ambitious civics initiative so that students can understand the principles that make our country unique.

Florida is leading on education and we must continue to do so.

We also must continue to protect our natural resources and invest in improvements in water quality. I ask that you continue to fund the key projects – from the EAA reservoir in the south to the projects in the northern Everglades – that will impact our state for generations to come, and reaffirms our commitment to Everglades restoration and access to safe, clean water for our communities.

similar proposals from the Legislature to address this important issue for our communities, and I look forward to signing into law a program that will make a difference.

Florida is — and must remain — a state dedicated to law and order. When riots broke out across the nation last year, we saw cities ruined by violent mobs. Law enforcement was targeted and lawlessness prevailed. This was not — and must never be — tolerated in the state of Florida.

As we saw rioting in other states last year, I called up the National Guard, mobilized mobile field force teams from the FHP, and worked with local officials like Carlos Gimenez and Lenny Curry to ensure that places like Miami and Jacksonville did not suffer the same fate as Minneapolis and Kenosha. Florida handled it well. But we need to do more.

Working with President Simpson, Speaker Sprowls and law enforcement groups across the state, we have proposed the strongest anti-rioting, pro-law enforcement reforms in the nation.

We will not permit localities to jeopardize the safety of their citizens by indulging in the insane fantasy of defunding law enforcement.

We will not allow our cities to burn and violence to rule the streets.

And we will not leave any doubt in the minds of those who wear the uniform that the state of Florida stands with you.

To paraphrase an old Merle Haggard song, when you mess with the men and women of law enforcement you are walking on the fightin' side of me.

Speaker Sprowls and Senator Simpson have also been leaders in supporting legislative reforms to protect Floridians from the power of Big Tech.

This is real-life 2021, not fictitious 1984, yet Big Tech wields monopolistic power over the public in ways that would have made the monopolists of the early 20th Century blush.

Floridians have a right to control their personal data and Big Tech should not be able to make billions of dollars off us without our informed consent.

Florida has always been a state that strongly supports free speech, and we cannot allow the contours of acceptable speech to be adjudicated by the whims of oligarchs in Silicon Valley.

Nor we can allow Floridians to be “de-platformed” or silenced with no means of recourse, and this is especially true of those who rely on these technology platforms for their livelihoods.

Finally, because Florida is dedicated to free and fair elections, we cannot allow Big Tech to interfere in our elections by putting a thumb on the scale for political candidates favored by Silicon Valley.

Speaking of elections, we should take a moment to enjoy the fact that Florida ran perhaps the most transparent and efficient election in the nation in 2020. People actually asked, why cannot these other states be like Florida? Such a sentiment would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

We also cannot allow private groups to pour millions of dollars into the administration of our elections. That is a public function and should be done free from this type of private interference.

Let us stay ahead of the curve on election administration – we never want to see the chaos of 20 years ago rear its head in Florida again.

I know these issues are merely scratching the surface of what the House and Senate will tackle this session. Of course, I would be remiss if I did not lend my support to the COVID liability bills for business and health care; for the Speaker's bills cracking down on the Chinese Communist Party and other foreign influence; general reforms to improve the state's legal climate; reform of the emergency powers of local government; and continued support for infrastructure.

I have no doubt that you will send me a lot more than that.

At the close of the constitutional convention the famed elder statesman, Benjamin Franklin, was asked to be the first to sign the new Constitution. Franklin pointed to General Washington's chair, the back of which had the design of a sun low on the horizon. "There were days," Franklin remarked, "when I thought this picture of a sun low on the horizon was a setting sun, but I now know it's a rising sun -- a new day for America, a new dawn for freedom."

Our nation and our state have endured a tumultuous year. Floridians have responded in ways that would make our founders proud.

Because of those efforts, the sun is rising here in Florida -- and the Sunshine State will soon reach new horizons.

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