

SIMPSON OPENING DAY REMARKS

March 2, 2021

NSF Staff

TALLAHASSEE — Senate President Wilton Simpson, R-Trilby, spoke Tuesday to the Senate to help open the 2021 legislative session. Here are his remarks, as prepared for delivery:

This is an opening day like none other. Fewer people. Less ceremony. But all hands on deck to tackle the needs of our state. And there are many needs. Before I talk about the issues, I want to express my thanks.

To all first responders, front-line medical professionals, farmers, truck drivers, teachers, families, and businesses who have been struggling and succeeding against all odds. Thank you for what you are doing to keep Florida open.

I want to especially thank outgoing Director Jared Moskowitz for your incredible service to our state. He is here today with the “other Jared” and I would like them both to stand and be recognized.

I also want to thank you, senators, for keeping our chamber and our staff as safe as possible.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 protocols have created challenges. Remote public testimony at the civic center, weekly testing, virtual meetings with constituents. There have been so many changes.

And let me thank all of our Senate staff for the extra workload they have carried to keep us safe. They make it look easy, but trust me, there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes that we never see.

The look and feel of the Capitol is different but our mission is the same.

As I mentioned at the organization session, we all recognize that the minor inconveniences we face here in Tallahassee pale in comparison to the sacrifices of so many who have endured so much as a result of this pandemic. It is their sacrifices which give us motivation to make the most out of this legislative session.

Over the next 60 days, we will address areas for improvement based on lessons learned throughout the pandemic.

Senator Brandes has led the effort to advance legislation to protect both businesses and health care providers from frivolous litigation related to COVID-19.

Our front-line health care workers have had to make very important decisions in the midst of rapidly changing guidance and protocols. We must do everything we can to protect these heroes.

Businesses across Florida have also suffered greatly and are doing the best they can to safely reopen during a period of extreme uncertainty. And when I say business, I mean everyday people who provide services to Floridians. They have taken risks. They have struggled to stay open during this pandemic.

Governor DeSantis, Speaker Sprowls and our House colleagues have been tremendous partners.

I look forward to seeing these great bills become law early this session.

In addition to addressing frivolous lawsuits, Senator Burgess has been leading the effort of our Pandemic Select Committee. Our goal is to be better prepared for future challenges that come our way.

Florida has become a model for recovery from hurricanes. We suffer. We learn. We improve. We are resilient. We are going to learn from this pandemic. We are going to get better prepared. We are going to prevent shutdowns. We are going to improve our unemployment system. I appreciate the hard work of the select committee. It is an ongoing mission, and we will make significant progress this session.

While there is a tremendous amount of work being done as a result of the pandemic, we don't want to lose momentum in addressing other challenges or seizing additional opportunities.

The budget is certainly going to put some constraints on us that didn't exist a year ago. Right now, things aren't looking as bad as they once did, and federal funding has been a part of that. But members, hear me now, none of that funding is recurring.

I am mindful that we may get yet another federal relief bill with more money for Florida. Some speculate that Florida may receive as much as \$8 billion. And if we do get it, our priority should be to reinvigorate this economy.

We can do that with dynamic, one-time investments in our shovel ready road projects, our water infrastructure, and we ought to replenish our unemployment trust fund which would be a major tax cut for our Florida businesses. The balance of funds should go into our state reserves.

We can't fund ongoing needs with nonrecurring funds. We need to be cautious with our spending, including re-examining past initiatives to make sure they are right for our state moving forward.

There's one important change we must make this year. I believe it is the single largest threat to Florida's balance sheet. When I was first elected back in 2012, President Gaetz assigned me to work on potential changes to our pension system. In 2008, the unfunded liability was only \$15 billion. In 2012, it was \$21.6 billion. And today it's \$36 billion. And with interest rates at zero for the foreseeable future, we know this problem is going to continue to grow.

We have seen other states' pension plans go bankrupt. People were made promises that their states could not keep. Our current retirees and every state employee should be very concerned. You will hear that Florida's pension plan is better than most. And it is. That's what every state always says right up until the time that they cannot pay the unfunded liability. It is why we need to make changes now. But let me be clear, if you are a current employee in the system --- your benefits will not change. Any changes will only impact employees coming into the system after July 1, 2022. It is important for us to recognize that unchecked and unchanged, our pension system will continue to take a bigger share of our state budget which will crowd out funding for other priorities.

I am also pleased to see the Senate leading the effort to reform Florida's child welfare system.

Like me, Senator Brodeur was adopted and he is doing a great job heading up our effort to create some consistency for children in out-of-home care so that we can finally stop the revolving door that shuffles kids around from one placement to another.

We all know Senator Book's commitment to protecting abused and neglected children. Her child welfare legislation presents a comprehensive series of reforms, from training to reporting, to make sure that no child falls through the cracks.

We know that the sooner a child has a permanent living situation, the better off they will be. And the reason we need to act now is because government is a terrible parent. All children need a loving home. Let us rally together to find permanent ones where they can thrive.

Most parents across our state are dedicated and hardworking, and would do anything to give their children a better life than they had.

That's why over the last two decades Floridians have embraced school choice programs. The problem is right now we have a pretty confusing system with various eligibility and funding mechanisms. The ongoing pandemic has even further highlighted the important responsibility of every parent to choose the best learning environment for their child. With well over 100,000 students currently using the variety of scholarship programs we have available, it's about time we streamlined eligibility and funding so that parents have a clear idea of their options.

The fact is, school choice has always existed for wealthy families. I believe this option should be available to every family. It is the only way to truly break the cycle of generational poverty. I'm pleased to see Senator Diaz leading this effort.

I also hope in this year's budget we will make the statement that we want to restore the honor associated with our "blue collar" workers. We will do that by incentivizing students to enter into the high-wage and high-value jobs, regardless of whether or not those jobs require a university degree.

We always say we are in favor of vocational training for our workforce. Let's finally make our budget reflect that value.

I know Senator Baxley and Senator Broxson have put a great deal of time in this matter, and I look forward to them presenting their work before this Senate.

The voters recently approved a constitutional amendment demanding us to raise the minimum wage --- and they gave us a timeline to implement it. But just because they gave us the time doesn't mean we ought to take it.

I would like this year's budget to provide increases to our lowest paid workers. It's one more way to honor these blue collar workers who are laboring every day to provide for their families.

I think the order was wrong, restoration is right. An investment in northern storage has many benefits. Not only can we clean water before it gets to the lake, we can store and use that water to protect us from times of drought. Once the northern storage is completed, it will stop 70% of the east/west releases along the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers. Because of the billions of dollars of investments that this legislature has made over the last two decades, we can again see the Everglades for what it is, the 8th wonder of the world. Let us put aside politics and embrace a comprehensive plan for total restoration.

Again, I am grateful for your diligence in adhering to our new protocols; for your patience with me, and with one another as we navigate the current status of the pandemic; and, above all, I want to thank for your commitment to serving the people of our state during these trying and unprecedented times.

In closing, my daughter Lauran — the mother of my granddaughters, reminded me that today is National Dr. Seuss Day.

Addy and Emy, I thought I would close with a quote that Papa picked just for you — and hopefully even the grownups might like it.

“You’re off to great places, today is your day, your mountain is waiting, so get on your way!”

Senators, let’s get on our way. Thank you. God bless you and God Bless Florida.

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