



For a Better Florida

*Florida House Democratic Caucus Leadership Policy Goals
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Presented by Florida House Democratic Caucus Leader Perry Thurston

Dear Floridian,

Florida is a great state blessed with a rich array of cultures, unique natural attributes and historical acclaim. But after 16 years of Republican rule of state government, Florida is failing to meet its potential.

Too many Floridians are being left out of the opportunities of the current national economic recovery. College costs are unaffordable for vast segments of the middle class and working families. Public schools are in a state of neglect. Most other states are outranking Florida in key educational measures, and educators here are underpaid and not shown sufficient appreciation.

Despite being the home to world-class health facilities and high-quality medical practitioners, basic health treatment and preventative attention is unattainable to many Floridians. Waiting lists are long for care for the elderly and other health services. In fact, Florida is in the midst of a health care crisis that has been vastly ignored by Republican leaders. More than a fourth of the state is without health coverage.

Roads, highways and other key infrastructure relied upon by agriculture and other industries are in need of upgrade. Florida's current political leaders have repeatedly rejected federal help to modernize the state's transportation systems.

Fairness in Florida is too often elusive when it comes to our tax structure, our judicial system, and for many people, at the workplace. Sadder yet, under Governor Rick Scott and Republican legislative leaders' custody, children and other vulnerable residents have been neglected, and some have lost their lives.

I happen to believe that Florida can do better. While there is no shortage of ideas, I believe it is imperative that I, along with other Florida House Democratic Caucus leaders, help to engage the conversation. Toward that goal, the following document outlines some of the challenges facing Florida, makes observations about Republican leadership, and presents a few policy goals, many of which can be achieved through meaningful bipartisan legislative dialogue.

Florida can, and must, do better.

Representative Perry E. Thurston, Jr.
Florida House Democratic Leader

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GROWING FLORIDA'S ECONOMY MIDDLE CLASS OUTWARD

Florida's economy should be doing better than it is, and the state's political leaders ought to be working harder to strengthen the middle class rather than rewarding special interests.

Florida is poised to become the third-largest state with nearly 20 million people. We offer a diverse population and the advantage of being a gateway to the economies of Central America and South America. But Florida's economy under Republican leadership is mired in mediocrity. Too many Floridians are struggling and the state's leaders have focused too often on using available resources for wealthy special interests and big corporations instead of the middle class, working families and small businesses.

Job growth in Florida is dominated by low paying service industry work. According to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, the top five occupations in the state are: retail salespersons (314,850 positions), cashiers (204,480 positions), waiters and waitresses (185,830 positions), customer service representatives (183,320 positions), and fast food workers (177,490 positions). Making matters worse, the Legislature and Governor Scott have restricted local governments from enacting living wage laws and sick time ordinances. Such ordinances require companies that do business with a local government to pay wages that are higher than the minimum wage and sometimes provide specific benefits.

Nearly one-fourth of the state's residents can be qualified as poor, in deep poverty or near poverty, according to the American Community Survey. House Democratic Caucus leaders believe there's opportunity to help struggling Floridians. Florida is expected to have substantial new revenues to spend in FY2014-15. It's time to bring help to the middle class, working families and small businesses.

Florida House Democratic Caucus leaders support:

- Repealing 2009-era fee hikes in auto tags, vehicle registration and other administrative fees.
- Raising Florida's minimum wage from \$7.93 an hour to a livable wage along the lines of legislation that proposes a \$10.10 an hour minimum.
- A comprehensive review of Florida's existing 200-plus sales tax exemptions to determine which ones still fulfill their original intent of spurring economic development.
- Closing a loophole that allows corporations to avoid paying state taxes on products sold in Florida by claiming the company's headquarter are in another state. Known as "combined reporting," the loophole puts genuine homegrown Florida businesses at a disadvantage with multi-state corporations.



SEEKING A HEALTHIER FLORIDA

Florida has among the highest number and percent of uninsured in the nation, but Governor Rick Scott and Republican legislative leaders have failed to significantly respond to this crisis. Florida is third behind only California and Texas in the number of uninsured nonelderly residents, and Florida ranks third highest in the percentage of uninsured, with nearly one in four Floridians under the age of 65 without health insurance coverage.

Had Governor Scott and Republican legislative leaders not blocked its full implementation in Florida, the federal Affordable Care Act would help make coverage attainable for an estimated 92 percent of the uninsured – either through tax credits for purchasing coverage in the Marketplace or Medicaid coverage if the state expanded the program.

Throughout 2013, the Republican-led Legislature and Governor Scott chose not to accept \$51 billion of federal funds, including \$3 billion that would have arrived in 2014. As a result, a coverage gap remains. Florida is home to an estimated 16 percent of the individuals nationwide who lack health coverage. Affected are people who either earn too little to qualify for the exchange tax subsidies or too much to qualify for Medicaid.

As of January 2014, the income cut-off for Medicaid coverage for Florida parents in a family of three will be \$6,809 a year. As a result, parents earning between \$6,810 and \$26,951 will be faced with the decision of either paying full price for coverage without any tax subsidies or going without insurance completely.

In still other terms: a single, minimum-wage-earning parent with two children who works more than 16 hours a week will earn too much money for Medicaid. Adults who don't have children will be without an affordable option if they earn less than \$15,856 since they won't be eligible for Medicaid whatsoever.

Republican legislative leaders have argued that there's no free lunch, which is true. But Floridians have already paid their fair share and it's time to put their tax dollars back to work in their home state. Of note, Republican leaders have chosen to request additional federal dollars for Medicaid under the label of "Low Income Pool" funding. Thus, instead of targeting money toward helping low-income individuals access quality, comprehensive health insurance, the Republican leaders have agreed to spend it on emergency room care that, typically, is more expensive and less efficient than primary care. Consider also that the current price tag for uncompensated care statewide is an estimated \$2.8 billion, all of which gets paid for with higher insurance premiums and our tax dollars. Insurance coverage for all would reduce the burden borne by hospitals, local taxing districts and state coffers for uncompensated health expenses.

Republican legislators have glossed over the notion that most of those who would be eligible for Medicaid are actually hard-working Floridians—people who are doing their best to play by the rules but simply can't afford insurance. These are folks who are unable to get insurance through their employers but don't earn enough to buy an individual plan. In fact, 64 percent of Florida's uninsured younger than 65 are in a family with at least one full-time worker. Another 15 percent are in families with part-time workers.

Governor Scott avoided the healthcare discussions of 2013. Though he popped up briefly to say that “Expanding access to Medicaid services for three years is a compassionate, common sense step forward,” he then disappeared on the issue and offered no leadership on which direction those steps should take.

Agencies under Governor Scott’s authority have similarly been out of the picture when it comes to informing the public of their options for coverage. Some have also blocked efforts to distribute information to the public. No obvious effort has been made on the part of key agencies to educate constituents on how, when, and where to sign up for coverage. The Florida Department of Health—under Governor Scott’s watch—went so far as to block trained and registered outreach officers, known as Navigators, from using county health departments to distribute information, arguing that they couldn’t be trusted with sensitive information. This occurred despite stringent background checks and registration requirements that the Republicans themselves put in place earlier in 2013.

Floridians can’t afford to wait any longer for help in accessing affordable healthcare. It’s time to move past stubborn, head-in-the-sand rhetoric and begin implementing policies that will guarantee greater access for all Floridians.

Toward a healthier Florida, House Democratic Caucus leaders support:

- Drawing down the full amount of available federal dollars to expand quality, comprehensive health coverage to the most people.
- Exploring ideas such as permanently raising physician rates under Medicaid beyond the two years covered by the Affordable Care Act to increase the number of providers available.
- Collaborating with stakeholders to develop a broad range of solutions for confronting anticipated health workforce shortages and increasing access to health care for all.
- Implementing a statewide campaign to educate the public on their options under the Affordable Care Act and assist with enrollment.



ENSURING COLLEGE AFFORDABILITY

Too many Floridians are priced out of the opportunity of a higher education. The cost of tuition, books and living expenses is too high, and House Democratic Caucus leaders want the state to become a better partner with families so that college degrees are more affordable.

In the 1980s, former Gov. Bob Graham proclaimed that the cost of providing a college education should be divided roughly 25 percent for families and 75 percent for the state. Since then, the state's share of covering the cost of a university education has dwindled. These days, the state is paying roughly half the costs at some universities.

To improve access and quality to our system of higher education, Florida should return to the university funding levels of at least FY 2007-08, which was \$2.7 billion. Today, the state's spending on higher education has fallen to \$2.2 billion and it fell to \$1.7 billion in FY 2012-13. The current FY 2013-14 budget spends \$400 million less than what the state paid six years ago, which doesn't significantly help middle class families better afford the costs of college; but it's a start.

Under Republican legislative control, Florida's Bright Futures Scholarship program has failed to keep up with the true costs of college, leaving many middle class and working families without the help students need and deserve. The scholarship program should be revamped to fulfill its original mission of guaranteeing that every outstanding high school student can have the entirety of their college tuition paid for at a Florida college or university. Affordable revisions can be made to the program to guarantee that Florida's highest-achieving students' tuition is covered.

To make college more affordable and develop a high-quality workforce, House Democratic Caucus leaders propose:

- Opposing further cuts to the Bright Futures scholarships while also advocating for scholarships based on students' financial need so that all achievers can attain a higher education.
- Offering new incentives for students who earn STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) degrees and who accept jobs in Florida after graduation.
- Increasing the state's share of the cost of attaining a college diploma, possibly to the FY 2007-08 level, or \$2.7 billion.
- Offering legislation to provide college tuition loan relief for law school graduates who take jobs as Florida prosecutors or public defenders.



CREATING CUTTING EDGE CLASSROOMS

Florida's Constitution guarantees every child the right to a high-quality public education. Unfortunately, Republican leaders have failed to prioritize public schools. Florida House Democratic Caucus leaders believe there is a better way.

Accountability and Standards: By transitioning to the Common Core Standards, students will be better prepared to succeed in college and careers. Students will learn to use logic, reason and critical thinking

skills to solve problems and analyze instead of being taught simply to bubble in circles on standardized tests.

A fair education-accountability system should consider the entirety of what children learn and teachers teach, not just part of it. Florida's A-F school grading system should be scrapped because it unfairly favors schools in affluent neighborhoods and penalizes more schools in poor communities. It should be replaced with a system that recognizes that the most important factor in determining how well a student performs in school is his or her socioeconomic status. Thus, resources should be directed to schools with students with the greatest needs.

As proposed by superintendents and school board groups, Florida should phase-in the implementation of Common Core for three years to allow time to develop a fair evaluation system for students, teachers and schools.

School Finance: Florida continues to run its public education system on the cheap. By many accounts, Florida may be making progress in student-learning gains as teachers spend more time focusing on teaching students how to take high-stakes tests, but compared to other states, we continue to rank poorly, especially when it comes to a financial investment in education.

House Democratic Caucus leaders hope to see Florida return to at least the FY 2007-08 funding level, which is \$7,126 per student, or a \$19.3 billion investment, that's needed if Florida is to compete effectively against other states' and nations' education systems.

Charter Schools: Seen as a creative method of blending education curriculum in a less-stringent regulatory environment, charter schools have recently begun to erode funding for traditional public schools. Florida House Democratic Caucus leaders would like to see local school boards have greater authority to oversee and negotiate with charter schools – authority that has gradually been taken away from the public school systems over the last seven years.

Charter schools should also meet the strict classroom student-teacher ratios mandated by the Class Size Amendment. Likewise, the state's share of construction and maintenance money for traditional public schools should be restored. In recent years, such public funding has been available almost exclusively to charter schools even though the state does not own most charter school facilities.

Early Learning: The quality of Florida's public prekindergarten program is among the worst in the nation. Research by Rutgers University has found that Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program meets only three of 10 quality benchmarks. Because of dismal funding of the program, the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers ranked it last among the 39 states offering public pre-kindergarten. Florida only provides enough money for children to attend a half-day of pre-school and Florida does not require private VPK providers to hire teachers with bachelors' degrees.

To create cutting edge classrooms and high-performing students, we propose:

- Abolishment of high-stakes testing in the performance evaluation of students, teachers and schools, and an end to the punitive A-F school grading formula.
- A \$19 billion investment in public school funding 2013-14. With \$7,126 per student, Florida can return to the FY 2007-08 funding levels for schools.
- Statewide implementation of rigorous new student assessment standards.

- A three-year waiting period before student testing data can be used for assessment of teachers and schools.
- Charter school reforms, including authorizing county school boards with more authority negotiate performance contracts with charter schools, and revising charter school class size calculations to match the formula used for traditional public schools.



PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

News reports have brought to light an unsettlingly large number of child fatalities resulting from abuse and neglect where there was prior involvement by DCF. According to a report by the federal HHS Children’s Bureau, Florida has one of the highest rates of child fatalities due to abuse or neglect in the country. The devastating loss of these young lives has made it evident that the state is failing to adequately protect its most vulnerable, and highlights the need for Florida to reevaluate DCF’s approach.

Committee meetings and discussions with stakeholders have revealed possible reasons for why DCF has been missing the mark for so many years. While some suggest that simply increasing the department’s budget is the solution, it is clear that money alone will not fix the deep rooted problems that have contributed to a startling number of child fatalities under DCF’s watch. The insufficiency of this suggestion becomes more apparent when the department’s operations are given a closer look.

Some advocates argue that one flaw in the system is that Florida does not require a degree in social work or a closely related field from its case workers or supervisors. Studies have found a correlation between hiring social workers with the specified degree to better outcomes for children, families, and retention of staff. Follow-up surveys with Florida State University graduates have indicated that the low requirements for becoming a social worker may be at the root of many of the problems in the department, including a poor professional environment that has caused fatal mistakes. Many of the employees who do hold a social work degree end up leaving the DCF because of the frustrating atmosphere. Moreover, front line workers complain that they are not getting enough support from their supervisors.

While praised as an initial step toward requiring qualifications, the Certification for Child Protection Professionals rule and statute arguably does not go quite far enough. One significant issue is that new employees are given one year to complete the certification requirement. With the high turnover rate at DCF, this means that many workers may come and go without ever meeting the requirement. In the end, the certification can’t compare with the more intensive training and study a degreed social worker would have from the start.

High caseloads and workloads have also been worrisome trends at DCF. Some feel that a high burden of cases prevents the employees from conducting thorough investigations and adequately following up on all of their cases, and contributes to a higher turnover rate. Reports of neglect or abuse should be addressed

immediately, and overburdened workers may not respond quickly or thoroughly enough to prevent dangerous situations.

In 2011, DCF laid off several employees in upper level administration as a result of budget cuts signed into law by Governor Scott. While administrative lay-offs could be linked to greater agency efficiency, one might wonder whether the end result is akin to an entire agency falling asleep at the wheel. In light of the tragic deaths of some of Florida's most vulnerable children while under the department's watch, the combination of unsatisfactorily trained employees, high caseloads, and a decrease in essential oversight has caused unacceptable results.

House Democratic Caucus leaders support actions to:

- Require immediate supervisors of child protective investigators (CPI's) to have a Master's degree in Social Work to increase professional support for front-level workers. CPI's should also be required to meet minimum credentials—ideally, a Bachelor's degree in Social Work.
- Increase the number of CPI's to ease case load burdens and ensure a focus on quality, thorough investigations instead of just achieving arbitrarily high numbers of closed cases.
- Reverse cuts to administrative level employees to ensure proper oversight of all agency programs.
- Implement outcome-based success measures for both DCF investigations and CBC's. Such measures will guarantee accountability and proper program focus.



TOWARD A MORE FAIR AND SECURE FLORIDA

One of the most important responsibilities of government is to assure the safety of residents while also protecting each citizen's rights and liberties. Similarly, Florida should work to grow the economy by attracting and retaining the best workers with a promise of equal opportunity employment.

This year, House Democratic Caucus members expect to support or sponsor measures to improve public safety while also preserving the rights we all enjoy as citizens.

House Democratic Caucus leaders hope to support proposals to:

- Expand and protect Floridians' opportunities to exercise their right to vote.

- Revamp Florida’s minimum-mandatory sentencing laws, restructure Florida’s criminal juries, and review how we punish non-violent offenders.
- Provide adequate support and funding for Florida’s public defenders, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, probation and correctional officers.
- Modernize state law to include anti-discrimination protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.



PRESERVING LAND, WATER AND OTHER NATURAL RESOURCES

Florida’s water resources are spectacular. So not surprisingly, tourists flock to the state to frolic on beaches, kayak streams and lakes, and we all admire the scenic beauty of our unique wetlands.

Farmers nurture their crops and resorts keep their fountains dancing with fresh, clean water drawn from underground. Therefore, it is vital that those charged with protecting these resources have the tools to complete their mission.

Likewise, with 1,700 streams and rivers, 7,800 freshwater lakes, 700 springs, 11 million acres of wetlands, Florida shouldn’t face shortages of water. Yet, water supplies are not infinite and water management districts have been vilified in recent years instead of being recognized for fulfilling the water needs of residents, businesses, farmers and tourists while planning for future growth.

Meanwhile, aside from the uniqueness and beauty of the Everglades, Florida’s celebrated “River of Grass” stands as a central fixture to our state’s heritage. Legislation passed in 2000 established a partnership with the federal government to begin remedying decades-long damage done to the Everglades. However, since its passage, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan has suffered from delays and lack of funding, especially in recent years. While Everglades restoration was originally funded at \$100 million or more, recent appropriations have been half that amount or less.

The Florida Forever program was once a priority for setting aside and maintaining conservation lands. What once was prioritized with at least \$300 million per year has fallen to dismal levels. What funding has been allocated to the program over the last few years has been used only to pay past debt service instead of purchasing additional land. In effect, the mission of acquiring valuable conservation lands has been halted at a time when land prices and interest rates would have given the greatest bang for the state’s buck.

Republican legislators have also pushed to discard “surplus” state-owned lands through a variety of means. One effort would have allowed state lands to be given away in exchange for only the promise to conserve a different parcel. Another would have changed the boundaries for state-owned lands under swamps, rivers, and marshes and would have resulted in a wholesale giveaway to private landowners. Last year’s budget for Florida Forever was even going to be largely funded through the sale of “surplus” lands with military base buffers set as the priority for new purchases.

Since the economic crisis of 2008, Florida has pursued a dangerous path in ratcheting back environmentally protective measures. Decades ago, officials on both sides of the aisle recognized the value of making sure our natural resources were clean and plentiful, and the Florida Water Resources Act of 1972 is just one example of that. In recent years, the economic situation has been used erroneously as an excuse to chip away at the protections once implemented to guarantee the long-term sustainability of our tourism, agriculture, and commercial industries, as well as the well-being of our residents. While most reasonable people recognize that the economic collapse had punched the construction and real estate industries in the gut nationwide, environmental concerns were somehow targeted in Florida as the reasons why houses weren't getting built and companies were firing employees en masse.

In that spirit, Republican legislators took the chance to dismantle entire departments, repeal laws, and impede the agency rulemaking process. The Department of Community Affairs (DCA) is one such casualty. Charged with preventing unchecked development since 1986, the department worked with local governments to prevent the poorly thought-out growth of the 1960s and '70s. Understandably, developers were frustrated that they didn't get a simple rubber stamp for every proposal and worked with their friends to paint the DCA as the instigator for Florida's economic problems. Ignoring the fact that Florida had a potential capacity of 600,000 new homes and 1.5 billion square feet of commercial space at the time, Governor Scott set his sights on the agency and Republican legislators completed the task of whittling away at the agency until it was only a shadow of its former self.

Similarly, Florida's Department of Environmental Protection has been hamstrung in various ways in recent years. A series of bills have radically reduced the department's powers. Under the guise of helping economic development, the bills have tamed agency input through "expedited" permit timelines and made public challenges to permits more difficult. Recently, DEP purged attorneys from its Office of General Council. Meanwhile, water management districts, who work with and under DEP's oversight, were ordered by Governor Scott to cut their budgets. The governing boards of the districts have had dwindling representation from the environmentalist community. In the aggregate, these measures have left Florida's mission of environmental protection in a precarious position.

Unnecessary and lengthy permits get in the way, but Florida's economy depends on its unique environmental resources. Agencies can offer useful guidance and prevent permanent damage to our natural surroundings that we, and those who visit our state, love so dearly.

Florida House Democratic Caucus leader seek to:

- Continue the fight against private possession of precious water resources that should remain available for use by all Floridians.
- Ensure that water management districts are equipped with adequate resources for research, planning, and balancing the interests of all water users.
- Pursue creative and prudent alternative water supplies appropriate for designated uses.
- Return funding of land restoration and conservation programs to pre-2008 levels to fulfill the spirit of Florida's land conservation programs and protect lands for future generations.
- Oppose arbitrary handouts of valuable state lands.

- Support the proposed state constitutional amendment to guarantee that funding is set aside each year for acquisition and restoration of state lands.
- Fight for sensible long-term protections for our unique natural resources and prevent further erosion of protections.
- Ensure that state agencies charged with looking out for our environment have the budgets and authority necessary to carry out that mission.



PLANNING FOR AND COMBATING SEA LEVEL RISE

The effects of sea level rise are being experienced in Florida today. Areas in South Florida are seeing more frequent flooding, especially in high tide. Some warn that more severe effects from rising sea levels are headed our way. Rising sea levels could result in more widespread saltwater intrusion of municipal drinking water supplies, forcing searches for other locations to tap. Many familiar with the real estate industry predict that sea level rise would mean drops in coastal property values—a scenario that would deal a devastating blow to the economy.

Despite these damaging effects, minimal state-level action has been taken. In its 2011 growth management “overhaul,” the Legislature only went so far as to allow—not require—local governments to engage in sea level rise adaptation planning. As for agency response to the impending threats of sea level rise, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO) has, aside from developing a pilot project in Fort Lauderdale, overwhelmingly avoided any real action on the issue.

Meanwhile, local governments that have been experiencing sea level rise effects first hand for some time have been searching for ideas and capital to protect their communities. Some have banded together, forming the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Compact in an effort to efficiently plan and respond. Though local efforts are necessary pieces of the puzzle, the state should be playing a greater leadership role and offering better planning and fiscal support. Given the potentially destructive effects that would ripple throughout the state, our leaders should feel a greater sense of urgency to plan and adapt to sea level rise.

We suggest:

- The Legislature should develop a statewide plan for addressing and adapting to sea level rise. Included in this statewide plan should be better guidance and support for local governments seeking to develop their own short- and long-term measures to cope with rising sea levels.
- The state should work with local governments to leverage federal funding for projects geared toward adapting to sea level rise.



ENERGY FOR FLORIDA'S NEEDS

Florida Republican leaders have failed to successfully broaden Florida's energy production through solar and renewable energy technologies. Rather than being recognized for innovation, Florida is better known on the energy front for allowing major utility companies to continue charging customers billions of dollars for non-existent nuclear facilities.

For a more sustainable energy future, Florida House Democratic Caucus leaders advocate for:

- An end to the policy of allowing large power companies to charge their customers up front for new nuclear power plants that may or may not get built as energy programs shift more toward renewable energy.
- Integrated Resource Planning, a process by which utility companies must detail and plan for using a wide range of conventional and renewable energy alternatives to meet customer's electric needs.
- A constitutional amendment to extend to commercial property a provision by which property appraisers cannot increase the market value of residential property after solar systems are installed.



PREPARING FOR FLORIDA'S FUTURE

As Florida's population grows, a major area of concern is the state's transportation system and the ability to keep it current. Shortsighted in their vision, Republican legislative leaders have eagerly swept the state's Transportation Trust Fund of millions of dollars that are needed to construct roadways and to make other various infrastructure improvements. It's time to reinvest in our state's infrastructure, which will help the state's economy. For every \$1 billion investment on infrastructure, experts contend that 28,000 jobs are created. And for every \$1 invested in the state Department of Transportation's work program, Florida's economy grows \$7 in return.

The needs are many throughout Florida. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, the state deserved a C-minus grade based on the current state of its infrastructure. Of the state's roadways, 26 percent are in poor condition and are proving costly to maintain. Similarly, Florida needs to invest in water and sewer, transit, flood control, energy, as well as in the areas of storm water and coastal projects.

Congestion on Florida's main interstates and roadways needs to be addressed but Governor Scott has taken action that has hampered progress. In 2009, the Legislature approved during a special session the creation of a system for high speed rail, and Florida was poised to receive substantial federal funding to cover costs. Not only would the project have been an economic stimulator and job creator, it would have provided roadway relief on Interstate 4 between Orlando and Tampa. Governor Scott rejected billions in funding from the federal government and has not offered any type of alternative strategy.

Florida, meanwhile, must continue to invest in our ports. Widening and deepening the ports in preparation for the expansion of the Panama Canal is an important Florida priority.

House Democratic Caucus leaders, seek:

- Proper investment in infrastructure to provide a safe and secure environment as well to grow jobs, the economy and to maintain Florida's global competitiveness.
- To continue the search for new alternatives to relieve congestion on Florida roadways.
- Secure sustainable and long-term funding sources to meet Florida's infrastructure and transportation needs.



RESTORING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

A strong democracy demands strong ethics. It's important to punish ethics violations among government officials to deter bad behavior and provide accountability. Today, the Florida Ethics Commission cannot look into possible violations without first receiving a complaint, even where there is information available that indicates the need to inquire into behavior of an official or employee. If, for example, a front-page news story exposes a series of unlawful acts, the Commission's hands are tied unless a citizen or specified official files a complaint form. If the complaint never comes, the behavior may go unpunished. Given this, it is no wonder that Florida received an "F" grade in the category of ethics enforcement in an investigation conducted last year by State Integrity, a consortium of government watchdog groups.

In 2013, the Florida legislature passed a bill authorizing the Governor, the Department of Law Enforcement, a state attorney, or a United States Attorney to file a written referral about a violation of the Code of Ethics for Public Officers and Employees. The legislation was in compliance with one of the recommendations made by the Ethics Commission in its 2012 report. However, this measure does not do nearly enough to ensure that our public officials are held accountable for their ethics violations. Furthermore, it ignores the Commission's plea to be given the authority to self-initiate investigations and to provide appropriate penalties.

Another obstacle interfering with government accountability is the insufficient penalty imposed on those who violate ethics laws, and the trust of their constituents. Currently, fines for ethics violations are capped at \$10,000. This figure can hardly serve as a deterrent when it seems that a significantly larger amount of money can be gained from an ethics violation.

The entity responsible for demanding high ethical standards from state actors should not be toothless. Republican leaders' reasoning is dubious behind their refusal to close loopholes and demand real accountability in the government they largely control. It is about time we assure the citizens of Florida that they can trust in the people to whom they delegate policy making power.

Toward a more accountable state government, we propose:

- Allowing the Ethics Commission to self-initiate investigations.
- Giving the Ethics Commission more discretion to impose appropriate fines.

Public Records:

To further keep government accountable to the people, steps are warranted to ensure that the public is well informed. While Florida has public records laws in place, in practice, public records are not always as accessible as they should be. High costs for accessing public records have a chilling effect on the free debate of ideas and are a burden on government accountability. Many argue that fees and regulations on how much information can be accessed are necessary to prevent government from being distracted from focusing on its policy goals. However, it is unacceptable that a citizen must endure a significant financial burden—and in some cases must hire an attorney—to access these records.

House Democratic Caucus leaders believe there is a way to allow access while imposing minimal detriment on both the government agencies and the people. It is our mission to work toward more than an illusion of access to government and to ensure that all citizens can demand transparency, accountability and good governance.

House Democratic Caucus leaders support steps to:

- Reduce fees to access public records.
- Make certain public records are available online for direct access.

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