

# FLORIDA SENATE MAJORITY OFFICE

SENATOR WILTON SIMPSON  
MAJORITY LEADER

## THIS WEEK IN THE FLORIDA SENATE JANUARY 9 – 13, 2017



### Florida Excellence in Higher Education

This week two important pieces of legislation were filed as a part of the Senate's comprehensive higher education agenda for the 2017 Legislative Session. This package of legislation will boost the strength and competitiveness of our state universities as our primary economic engine to drive vibrant, sustainable economic development and growth in high-paying jobs.

**Senate Bill 2, the "Florida Excellence in Higher Education Act,"** promotes on-time graduation by expanding student financial assistance and support, establishes tuition and fee incentives, streamlines 2+2 articulation, and strengthens mechanisms that keep colleges and universities accountable to Florida taxpayers. By improving Florida's 4-year graduation rate, over time, we will increase the national reputation of our universities, further improving Florida's ability to attract top student scholars, faculty, and business partners. Senate Bill 2 also *reinstates the highest Bright Futures Scholarship Program Award* (Florida Academic Scholar) to cover 100 percent of tuition and certain tuition-indexed fees, including the summer term, plus \$300 for textbooks and college-related expenses during the fall and spring terms.

**Senate Bill 4, Recruit and Retain Elite Faculty,** expands and enhances policy and funding tools state universities can leverage to recruit and retain the very best faculty, enrich professional and graduate school strength and viability, and bring aging infrastructure and research laboratories into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Recruiting and retaining elite faculty, improving our university facilities, and enhancing our professional schools will dramatically enhance the national reputation of Florida's universities.

The Senate is committed to developing a package of policy enhancements and funding investments that will elevate the prominence of our state universities and increase their ability to compete as national destination institutions, while preserving access and increasing affordability for Floridians.

### **Legislation to Keep BP Oil Settlement Funds in Northwest Florida**

**Senate Bill 364, The Recovery Fund for the Deepwater Horizon Incident**, was filed to ensure funds received in the settlement of the state's economic damage claims caused by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill remain in Northwest Florida's eight disproportionately affected counties. Under current law, the eight disproportionately affected counties are to receive 75 percent of all economic damage settlement funds received by the state. Senate Bill 364 clarifies that funds are to be directly appropriated to Triumph Gulf Coast Inc. no later than 30 days after they are received by the state.

The eight Florida counties disproportionately affected by the Deepwater Horizon Spill include: Bay County, Escambia County, Franklin County, Gulf County, Okaloosa County, Santa Rosa County, Walton County, and Wakulla County. Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc. is tasked to work with local governments to make awards to programs and projects that meet the priorities for economic recovery, diversification, and enhancement of the disproportionately affected counties.

### **Workshop on K-12 Assessments Policy and Funding**

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Pre-K-12 Education conducted a workshop on K-12 Assessments Policy and Funding, which included discussions on Florida's current statewide assessments and the funding components needed to administer these tests.

Over the last few years the Legislature has worked to reign in testing in our schools. Building on that idea, the committee heard feedback from superintendents, education policy organizations, and the Florida Department of Education, who provided their perspectives as to the pros and cons of the state's current testing system. The panel also discussed ways to streamline some of Florida's mandatory high school exams including the possibility of using college placement exams as an alternative option to state mandated exams.

Also, the panel discussed flexibility options for students regarding test taking methods, which included a paper and pencil option, computer-based option, or a combination of both methods. Moving forward, the committee's work will focus on making sure our schools, teachers, parents, and students remain accountable, but also provide practical solutions to address the concerns presented to lawmakers over the past few years that Florida's students are being over tested.

### **Appropriations Committee Receives Important Updates**

The Senate Committee on Appropriations received an update on Florida's Medicaid Program. The committee discussed the possibility of working with new leadership in Washington to pursue a block-grant program, which would allow Florida the freedom to determine how best to run our own Medicaid program so we can best meet the needs of Floridians.

Additionally, the State Surgeon General provided an update on the Zika virus. There are currently 1,291 Zika cases reported in Florida, which includes travel related cases. Of those reported, 208 cases were pregnant women. Blood donations in the state are also being tested for Zika.

To date, the Department of Health has received \$47.8 million in federal funding in response to Zika and \$36.2 million from the state's general revenue fund. The Department of Health will continue to work with health care professionals, blood banks, mosquito control districts, and local governments in 2017 to help prevent any further outbreaks.