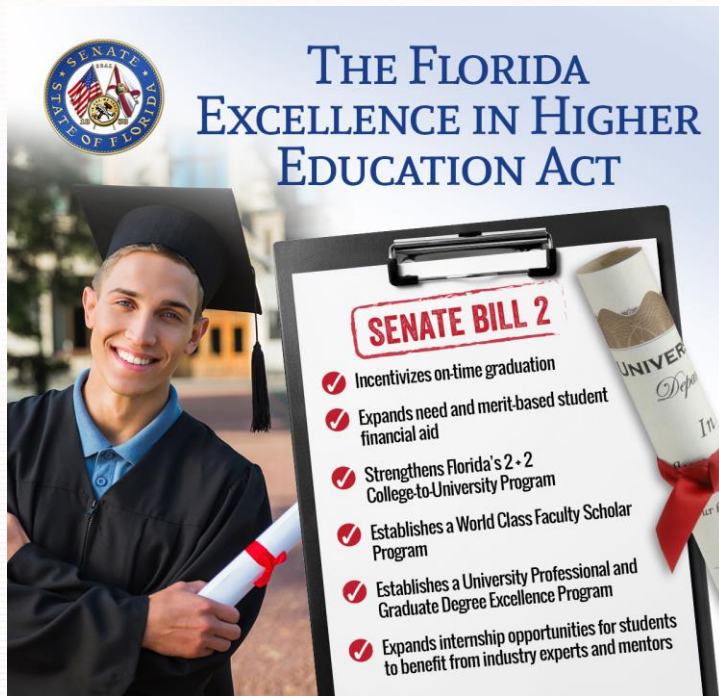


THIS WEEK IN THE FLORIDA SENATE
MARCH 6 - 10, 2017

Senate Passes Excellence in Higher Education Act

The Florida Senate passed Senate Bill 2, the Florida Excellence in Higher Education Act. This comprehensive legislation will boost the strength and competitiveness of our state's higher education system as our primary economic engine to drive vibrant, sustainable economic development and growth in high-paying jobs.



This legislation's primary objectives include working with universities to hold them accountable to the taxpayers and better serve the student population. When the top Florida students attend our universities, complete their degree on time, and graduate with job opportunities in high-demand fields, Florida taxpayers will see the worthwhile return on investment our state needs.

By increasing need and merit-based financial assistance for university students and requiring universities to create flexible tuition policies, we can improve Florida's 4-year graduation rate, which means cost savings for students and their families. Together with policy enhancements and funding investments that support university efforts to recruit and retain renowned faculty, improve facilities, and enhance professional schools; this legislation will help elevate the national reputation of Florida's state universities, and further increase the return on investment for students, parents, and taxpayers.

Senate Bill 2 prioritizes on-time graduation as a goal for our system of higher education, while still recognizing that, for a variety of reasons, not all students will be able to complete their programs within the traditional timetable. The legislation also makes it clear that schools are only evaluated on the graduation rates of our traditional, full-time, first-time-in-college students. No student is penalized in any way by this policy. This pro-student legislation supports students by removing barriers to graduation and helping ease financial insecurities that lead students to delay completing their degrees.

Senate Committee Passes Coast-to-Coast Comprehensive Water Resource Program

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on The Environment and Natural Resources passed Senate Bill 10, Water Resources. This bill addresses the critical need for water storage south of Lake Okeechobee and was expanded to include a Coast-to-Coast Comprehensive Water Resource Program, which provides funding tools to implement water resource protection and development programs across Florida.

Harmful polluted releases from Lake Okeechobee have flooded communities on the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers with massive amounts of toxic algae that destroyed estuaries and harmed the local and state economies. Unfortunately, incidents like this are not unique in our state and are a symptom of the lack of attention to water resource development.

After hearing from citizens from around the state, this critical piece of legislation was expanded to not only address an immediate response to the Lake Okeechobee crisis, but also to include other pressing water issues facing our state as a whole.



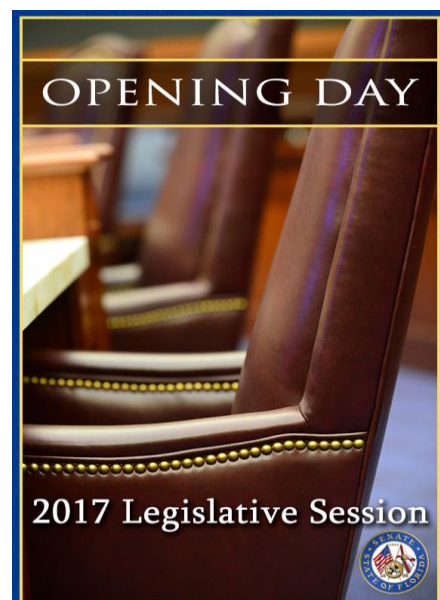
Senate Bill 10 recognizes that with approximately 30 percent of all land in the Florida already managed for conservation purposes; it is time to meet the directive Florida voters gave the Legislature through the Water and Land Conservation Amendment, and begin focusing on land acquisition and conservation priorities regarding specific improvements related to water resources.

Opening Day of the 2017 Legislative Session

The Senate convened for Regular Session on Tuesday, March 7, 2017. During the first day of Session, also known as Opening Day, it is customary for the presiding officers to expound on the key priorities their respective Chambers will focus on during the next 60 days.

Senators joined with their families, friends, and constituents on Opening Day to commemorate the official start of the Legislative Session.

You may view the full first day of the Senate Session, which includes remarks by Senate President Joe Negron at the following link: [Opening Day in the Senate](#).



Religious Liberties Act Passes First Committee Stop

Senate Bill 436, Religious Expression in Public Schools, passed this week in the Senate Committee on Education. The legislation creates the “Florida Student and School Personnel Religious Liberties Act,” and specifies that a school district may not discriminate against a student, parent, or school personnel on the basis of a religious viewpoint or religious expression.

Senate Bill 436 authorizes students to express religious beliefs in written and oral assignments, free from discrimination. Students may also wear clothing, accessories, and jewelry that display a religious message or symbol to the same extent secular types of clothing, accessories, and jewelry that display messages or symbols are permitted in public school dress codes.

Further, students may pray, engage in, and organize religious activities before, during, and after the school day, to the same extent student engagement in secular activity or expression, and the organization of secular activities and groups are permitted. The legislation requires a school district to comply with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and specifies that a school district may not prevent school personnel from participating in religious activities on school grounds that are student-initiated at reasonable times before or after the school day.



Legislation to Reduce Criminalization of Adolescents Advances

The Florida Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Civil and Criminal Justice passed Senate Bill 196, Juvenile Civil Citation and Similar Diversion Programs. In too many cases, law enforcement officers are brought in to referee the day-to-day challenges of raising children. This legislation seeks an appropriate balance between public safety and decriminalizing the mistakes of adolescents.

Senate Bill 196 requires a law enforcement officer to issue a civil citation or require the juvenile’s participation in a diversion program when the juvenile admits to committing certain first-time misdemeanor offenses including: possession of alcoholic beverages, criminal mischief, trespass, and disorderly conduct, among others. Under Senate Bill 196, a law enforcement officer must provide written documentation articulating why an arrest is warranted when he or she has the discretion to issue a civil citation, but instead chooses to arrest the juvenile.

The legislation also specifies that the option of the issuance of a civil citation or referral to a similar diversion program does not apply to a juvenile who is alleged to have committed, currently charged with, has plead guilty to, or has been convicted of a felony, or a misdemeanor offense arising out of an episode in which the juvenile is also alleged to have committed a felony.