

Remarks as prepared

**Opening Day Speech
2013 Legislative Session
House Speaker Will Weatherford
Tuesday, March 5, 2013**

Members, the table is set to get things done.

We're serving in a unique moment of history as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of Spanish explorers coming to Florida.

In 1513, Ponce de Leon was commissioned to seek a land of promise. He embarked on a difficult journey--- sailing with three companion ships --- finding a place of beauty and intrigue which he named "La Florida" after the Spanish Feast of Flowers.

500 years later, we find ourselves in the midst of our "feast of flowers."

Those explorers couldn't have imagined what lay ahead when they first stood upon our shores.

So too, today, we cannot imagine what we will be.

Our destiny will not be achieved by chance. It will be secured by action.

We are the change agents -- the instruments of our time -- to shape the future of Florida.

Months ago, Senate President Gaetz and I identified a few priority issues that our chambers could work on together. Many said the very idea of us working together was destined to fail.

In fact, I'm told the last time it was tried, the presiding officers couldn't even agree on a location for the planning meeting.

But thanks to President Gaetz, we have put forth a "Florida Work Plan."

It's very straightforward: restore trust in government, protect our fiscal future, and foster upward mobility through education reform.

First, we must restore trust in government because if the public believes that our elections are flawed, that our ethics laws are weak, and that our campaign finance laws are broken, how will they ever have confidence in anything else we do here?

I want to thank Representatives Boyd and Cruz for working together to bring forth an elections reform bill that we will vote on later this afternoon.

The House will have the chance to pass a bill that will give Floridians more hours, more days and more places to vote.

Let the passage of this bill serve as the first example of how we can work together!

We will also have an ethics bill that holds public officials to a higher standard I think we can all agree that this is long overdue, and I am very grateful to Senate President Gaetz for leading on this effort.

But you can't do meaningful ethics reform without campaign finance reform.

We need to bring sanity to our campaign finance laws. We need to once and for all end CCEs. We must increase transparency so that voters will know who's giving money to campaigns so they can make informed decisions.

It's not complicated. If Floridians can't trust us with basic responsibilities how will they ever trust us on the bigger challenges?

And there is perhaps no greater challenge than protecting our long-term fiscal stability.

You see, pension reform is about safeguarding our financial future.

Some defenders of the status quo may ask, "What are we fixing?" "Where's the crisis?"

Members: this session, we will spend 500 million dollars of general revenue just to shore up our pension fund. That's above and beyond what we contribute to state employees' retirement.

And it's just the down payment.

We're going to have to keep writing that half billion-dollar check for another 28 years –to keep our so called "great pension system" afloat.

It's not sustainable. It's not rational. And it's not keeping with the times we are living in.

Members, our pension system isn't just about giving our state employees a secure and dignified retirement it's also about being able to meet commitments to our entire state.

It's about our public schools, our public safety, protecting our seniors, our healthcare.

Because as Floridians, we are in the same fiscal boat. We are all in this together.

Our plan is fair. Our plan is affordable.

And our plan will ensure that we won't have to raise taxes in order to bail out a failed pension system in the future.

Victor Hugo once said, “there is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time is come.”

The time has come for pension reform.

We will continue our pursuit of a world class, student centered K-12 education system in Florida but we must also turn our attention to higher education.

Education solves problems that government cannot.

Florida needs nationally acclaimed universities.

We must break the parochial, narrow vision that has encouraged a culture of mediocrity.

We set the stage last year with an approach that we called preeminence. It was a good idea then and it’s a good idea now.

Every university will have the same opportunity to earn more funding through high achievement. No University will have a guaranteed outcome.

By untethering our best to rise to the top we will lift the entire system.

But equally important, we need an innovative university that utilizes and leverages technology in a way like never before.

Change is already here.

We can harness it or we can cling to outdated models that stifle innovation.

Our students today are the most technologically advanced in the history of our country. They grew-up and live online.

Universities must be challenged to think differently.

In order to do this, we need to inject a disruptive innovation into the system.

Members, a branded, accredited, singularly-focused online university will be that catalyst for change.

The demand is already here. Floridians from every walk of life can and will utilize this option as soon as we offer it.

Whether it is our national guard serving overseas--- a single mother trying to provide for her children --- or a student who wants to be more marketable in a new and innovative economy.

A high quality virtual education will help them achieve their dream.

And the best part about it is that we can offer it for a fraction of the cost. Our next generation of students won't have to choose between being saddled with debt and getting a degree.

We can lead on this. WE MUST lead on this.

While we are removing barriers to upward mobility for Floridians, we must not forget a group of people who've been left behind.

Our nation is a nation of immigrants. Florida is a state of immigrants. But today, we're treating some of our children born in Florida whose parents made mistakes, as second-class citizens.

They do not enjoy what every other child born in Florida receives-----in-state tuition.

If you're born in America you're an American. And to hold any other view completely contradicts everything that our country was founded upon.

I want to thank Representatives Nunez, Trujillo, Artilles and Fullwood for working together to bring forth a bill that will put into statute what our constitution, our courts, and frankly our conscience tells us is right.

I look forward to voting yes on their bill.

But our job doesn't end with this Work Plan – it's only the beginning.

Over the next 60 days, we'll continue the excellent Florida tradition of passing a balanced budget.

Once again, we will show our friends in Washington that it can be done. Florida will show them how.

We'll continue to push K-12 education reforms. We'll provide more resources to our hard working teachers. We will implement a long-term plan to protect our national treasure the Everglades. We'll continue to make new invests in our infrastructure. We'll reduce regulations on small businesses so they can hire more people instead of paying more to government.

And let me be clear -- we will not raise taxes.

Which brings me to the last policy initiative that I'll talk about this morning.

Perhaps one of the most challenging questions we'll face this Session is whether we should expand Medicaid.

Let me start by saying, I know this is a very difficult issue.

Passions will run high and principles will clash within this chamber.

On the matter of expansion, allow me to depart from the message of the House for a moment, and speak to you about my personal views.

First of all, let me say, I believe in the safety net.

My family has benefitted from the safety net.

As many of you know, I grew up in a family of nine children. My father was self-employed and did the best he could to provide for us but we never had health insurance. We could never afford health insurance.

My baby brother Peter was diagnosed with cancer when he was 13 months old. He was in and out of the hospital for seven months.

My Mom and Dad basically lived at the Ronald McDonald House – because they couldn't afford to stay in a hotel.

After two major surgeries, Peter lost his battle with cancer and my father found himself with a mountain of medical bills that he could never afford to pay.

It was the safety net that picked my father up.

It was the safety net that picked my family up.

I will continue to believe in – and fight for – a strong safety net for Florida.

Because the measure of our state is not how well we take care of the rich, but how well we take care of the sickest and weakest among us.

But Members, I also firmly believe that a government that grows too big, becomes too intrusive, and fosters too much dependency will threaten our liberty, our freedom and our prosperity.

Members --- I am opposed to Medicaid expansion because I believe it crosses the line of the proper role of government

I believe it forces Florida to expand a broken system that we have been battling Washington to fix, and I believe it will ultimately drive up the cost of health care.

This inflexible plan, thrust upon us by the federal government, is not aimed at strengthening the safety net.

It pushes a social ideology at the expense of our future.

The trouble with this social experiment is that it is destined for failure.

The notion that we're going to receive free money from the federal government is laughable.

This is the same federal government that has not passed a budget in nearly four years.

This is the same federal government that spends 1.2 trillion dollars more than it takes in in every year.

Florida is being tempted with empty promises to comply with policies we would never pay for if we knew the true cost.

They're trying to buy off states one by one.

I am not buying it. Florida should not buy it.

Because their failure to deliver has such high stakes for Floridians.

If they get this wrong, we are on the hook.

It would be far easier for me, and for us, to simply say yes to the so called "free money," enjoy the accolades for a few years, and leave office knowing that the true cost will come due long after we're gone.

It's not right, and it's not what I signed up for.

Members, as you can tell, I have my opinion on this matter, and you will have yours... I look forward to the debate on this floor.

I want to thank Chair Corcoran and Chair Hudson for the thoughtful approach they're taking. I am confident this House will make the best decision for our state.

Members, this session we have a serious task at hand, and I expect you all to take your job very seriously.

Because we represent people who are counting on us. Our conduct and our character should be worthy of their trust.

As your Speaker, I would ask that we consider the following questions as we approach our work for the next 60 days?

Will we leave the people of our state more free, or more dependent?

Will we give them more opportunities to shape their own destiny, or will we narrow their options?

Will we earn the people's trust, or will we let them down by confirming their worst fears about government and politics?

Will we work to build a solid foundation for the future, or will we leave the hard decisions for those who come after us?

Finally, here's the bottom line – the State of Florida has an opportunity to create a pocket of freedom. A pocket of freedom in the midst of the national uncertainty that we are witnessing today.

We can create a place that rekindles the ideal that through hard work-- and playing by rules -- anybody can succeed.

It's the "ladder up" concept that is so unique to this country but feels so out of reach for many today.

Members, if we accomplish nothing else we ought to be able to look in the mirror when our work is done and know, that all of us Republican and Democrat, made that ladder wider and higher and easier to climb for every Floridian.

And by doing so, we will create a pocket of personal and economic freedom that will be the envy of the country and of the world.

Let's get started! Thank you. God Bless you and God bless the Great State of Florida.

###