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Speaker Crisafulli's Opening Day Remarks

Before we convene in Joint Session and bring back Governor Scott to hear his State of the State Address, I want to outline what you can expect to see the House work on over the next sixty days.

First, however, I want to thank our families for being here. Our families are what keep us focused on getting the job done during our time here. The love and support of Kristen and our girls keeps me going each and every day, and I know the same is true for each of you and your own families.

Members, as I have said before – I'm not the Speaker of just the Republicans, I am the Speaker of the House. Every Member in this chamber has an important role to play in our work.

Leader Pafford, I look forward to working with you, and I believe we can have a successful session.

And, to President Gardiner, who is presiding over the Senate session right now, I want to say that you are a good and decent man, and the House looks forward to working with you on a productive session.

Today is a special day. 170 years ago on this day, Florida became the 27th state of the United States of America. Can you imagine describing today's Florida to someone living here in 1845? Just imagine trying to explain Disney World or the Kennedy Space Center. We have come a long way from a Florida that had 66,000 residents, that was split into three parts – East, West, and Middle – and not a single air conditioner in the entire state.

Did you know that in 1845, our motto was actually "Let Us Alone?" Today, it's "Visit Florida!"

Ironically, one of the first fights between the House and Senate was over adopting the state flag bearing that motto, "Let Us Alone." For the record, the House won.

However, it just goes to show you, that winners are not always right. I am thankful we have turned away from the "Get off my lawn" state – and have partnered with Visit Florida to welcome people from all around the world to enjoy our Florida.

Today's Florida would surprise someone like my cousin Doyle Carlton, the Governor during the Great Depression. He ran a state with 1.4 million people and a \$30 million budget.

Although, he would be familiar with some of the problems we've faced recently – budget shortfalls, a citrus industry under attack from disease, and even...pension reform, he would be surprised by how far we've come.

- With an agriculture industry that now helps feed the world.
- By having the world's busiest space port at Cape Canaveral.
- And by a Florida that is now the third largest state in the country.

So, while today is an important day to reflect, it's more important to talk about Florida's future.

During Organization Session, I spoke about branding. I said that the brand of this House is that our service is all about Florida. Well, our agenda this year is certainly true to our brand. Our agenda will help us build the brand of this great state.

Our agenda is a joint set of priorities developed in partnership with President Gardiner and our friends in the Senate. As I have said before, this Legislature is so much more effective when we focus on getting results, not on who gets the credit. President Gardiner and I believe our Work Plan will set the foundation for a successful session.

Work Plan 2015 is an ambitious agenda that contains Five Solutions for a Stronger Florida.

First, we will strengthen Florida's economy by providing tax relief to families and businesses. Tax cuts are essential to improve Florida's business climate and make our state more affordable for families. The results of our low-tax policies are clear. We have the second best business climate in the country. Our economy has added over 728,500 private sector jobs in four years and unemployment has fallen to 5.6%.

The House is eager to provide Floridians with a broad-based and meaningful tax cut. Chairman Gaetz is leading our efforts, and it is my hope that we will pass a tax cut package that will surpass last year's \$500 million cut.

Next, we will strengthen pathways to economic independence for persons with disabilities.

There are a number of ways we will do this.

First, we will establish a new postsecondary designation for programs that combine college experience with academic and career training for students with disabilities and expand the Personal Learning Scholarship Account program to allow more parents to create customized education plans for their children.

We will create financial literacy programs for people with developmental disabilities and establish a "Unique Abilities Designation" program for Florida businesses.

Lastly, we will pass legislation to implement the ABLE Act, which creates tax-free savings accounts that help people pay for needs such as education and healthcare.

I want to commend President Gardiner for his leadership on this issue. Our society is stronger when opportunity for success exists, especially for those who need it most.

Third, we will strengthen the health of our waterways and natural resources. I've talked a lot about water in recent years, and tomorrow, we will take up Chair Caldwell's water policy bill on the floor.

Water is a fundamentally precious resource, and we should not wait for a crisis to tackle this very important, and complex issue. We must establish a long-term, comprehensive approach toward addressing our water challenges. It will take a combination of sound policy and smart investments to protect the health of our waterways and develop greater access to a clean and abundant water supply for our state. And, to be clear – we cannot solve all of Florida's water challenges in a single session – this issue will require a sustained commitment from this Legislature for years to come.

We must also pass legislation to implement Amendment 1, which 75% of Florida voters supported.

I believe the intentions of Amendment 1 to preserve our land and water resources are good. Some would say that Amendment 1 funds should be primarily used to acquire more sensitive lands. But, Members, let's get one thing straight – stewardship is much more than ownership.

Buying up land we cannot care for that falls into disrepair or becomes a breeding ground for harmful invasive species is not a legacy I am interested in leaving. If we truly want to honor our beautiful state, then we should spend these early years making sure we can maintain the 5.3 million acres of conservation lands we already own.

Whip Boyd is working on implementing legislation that creates a process that allows the money spent on Amendment 1 to be easily seen, transparently tracked, and lets the public hold us accountable.

To clear up a common misconception about Amendment 1 funding, we have already been spending at near Amendment 1 levels in recent years. As our economy continues to improve, environmental spending will increase even more, and our implementing legislation will build a solid framework to facilitate this.

Fourth, we will strengthen our families by promoting adoptions. Promoting adoptions is one of the most meaningful ways we can strengthen families and provide our most vulnerable children with loving homes.

To help find forever homes for the hundreds of children in foster care, we will create an incentive program for community based care and provider agencies to make the adoption process more efficient and effective. We will reinstate the adoption subsidy for state and local government employees. And, we will create a recognition program to honor individuals, families, and organizations who find homes for foster children.

It is my sincere hope that our efforts will change the lives of children in need of loving homes.

Finally, we will strengthen our children's foundation for success by providing them with a first-rate education.

In this year's budget, we are committed to allocating the highest level of K-12 per-student spending in state history. We will also work to make higher education more affordable and increase performance funding for our universities.

Student testing will be one of the most important topics we talk about in education this year, and I want to speak to you now as a parent, not as a legislator. As the father of two girls in public schools, accountability is essential to me. I want to know my children are learning; I want to know their teachers are teaching; I want to know their schools are preparing them for success. In order to do that, we have to measure. We have to test.

Accountability is not meant to punish kids – it is meant to make sure they are learning important knowledge and skills and give them support if they are falling behind.

The fact of the matter is accountability works. And, accountability has produced remarkable results for our students. Results like the highest graduation rate in Florida's history, 7th in the nation for student achievement in our schools, and incredible learning gains by our minority students.

However, I acknowledge legitimate concerns have been raised about student testing. And, we will address those concerns. But we will not retreat from accountability.

Our reforms will recognize that the number one priority in education is to ensure that our schools are focused on student success. Our work will adhere to these three principles:

- Maintain a strong accountability system that effectively measures student learning and promotes quality instruction in the classroom;
- Increase transparency of accountability requirements so parents, students, teachers and taxpayers can have clear and consistent information;
- And, maximize teacher, principal and school district flexibility to successfully implement Florida's accountability system.

Chair O'Toole is leading the House's reform effort, and her committee will roll out a work product in the next few weeks.

Lastly, we need to expand vocational opportunities. Not every student wants a four-year degree, and we should do more as a state to encourage vocational education opportunities for our young people.

We need to support Governor Scott's plan for a rapid response start-up grant program that links local workforce needs to job demands. We also need to expand career and technical education by increasing opportunities for students to get on-the-job training in high-skill, high-wage areas through apprenticeship programs.

These efforts will be an important step in meeting workforce needs and creating good paying jobs for Floridians looking to enter the workforce after high school.

Although our Work Plan is broad, it does not constitute the totality of the House's agenda. Obviously, we will work hard to pass a responsible, balanced budget that meets the needs of our citizens.

I've also made no secret that state and local pension reform needs to be passed by this Legislature. It's an issue we can't afford to ignore.

Many people ask why we need pension reform. They say our system is healthy and we are creating a crisis that doesn't exist.

Members, a pension crisis does exist, and it's bankrupting cities and states and altering the deals many hardworking families were counting on for their retirements.

When we have to dedicate over \$500 million in the budget to cover the shortfall in Florida's pension system – that's a problem. When local governments are \$11 billion in debt because of unsustainable pension obligations – that's a problem.

Leadership means that we take action to solve problems before they become catastrophic.

By strategically reforming Florida's pension system today, we will prevent future benefit cuts for retirees and tax increases for families.

Some have asked, what are the odds of Pension Reform passing? The real question is, why would we take this on without a guarantee of passage? My answer is pretty simple: because it's the right thing to do for Florida. So, this House will keep pushing for reform.

Members, Florida has come a long way since 1845, but our work to create a stronger future for our children is never finished. That is why we have developed an agenda commensurate to our brand, an agenda that ensures our focus and our service is all about Florida.

I'll leave you with a quote from Governor Carlton – he said that “the well-being of the State is measured by the well-being of the average man.” That’s exactly who our agenda focuses on.

So, let’s put aside the politics and work together to pass our agenda, an agenda that will put the average Floridian on firmer ground and pave a stronger path for Florida