

### **A Snapshot Preview: What to Expect During Florida's 2006 Legislative Session**

The month of March is widely known as the month that brings the first signs of spring, rolling in like a lion and out like a lamb. Every year however, somewhere between the torrential downpours and the fresh blossoms, Floridians can also expect the state's annual legislative session to commence at the Capitol. Beginning on March 7<sup>th</sup>, Florida lawmakers will travel to Tallahassee for 60 days of addressing our most challenging issues and passing legislation to benefit families, businesses and the economy.

As the one constitutionally mandated duty of the Legislature, crafting a sound budget beneficial to all Floridians is our most important task. Fortunately, our state remains abound with prosperity, boasting rapid job and income growth and one of the strongest economies in the nation. As a result, the state treasury has received a significant windfall, leading Governor Bush to present a proposed budget of \$70.8 billion.

Fiscally responsible spending and giving back to the citizens of Florida through tax reform have established a positive economic trend; a trend which I am confident will continue in 2006. The Legislature is expected to bring back popular measures like the 'Back-to-School' and the 'Hurricane Preparedness' sales tax holidays as well as complete the phase out of the Intangibles tax. Furthermore, creative surplus spending proposals such as one-time homeowner tax rebates or resolving the financial hardships faced by Citizens Property Insurance will also be considered.

Some notable highlights from the Governor's proposal that will directly benefit the citizens of the Treasure Coast include considerable funding for emergency operations centers, workforce/attainable housing programs, economic development initiatives and growth management infrastructure. The Governor has also proposed \$25 million for Lake Okeechobee and estuary recovery; funding that will specifically target our local natural resources through the expansion of water storage and treatment areas.

In addition to crafting the budget, my colleagues and I will ardently work on legislation to improve education, health care, crime prevention, transportation, the environment and many other issues important to Floridians.

One of the most innovative proposals that will directly benefit homeowners is a measure that would give a portability aspect to the Save Our Homes constitutional amendment. Skyrocketing property values have essentially trapped Floridians in their homes because they are unable to afford the taxes on a new residence. If the Legislature passes this joint-resolution, voters in the 2006 general election will decide whether to allow for the transfer of a homestead exemption when purchasing a new primary residence.

Homeowners should also once again see Florida push to the forefront of the nation in property rights. After the Supreme Court egregiously ruled in favor of eminent domain during the Kelo v. New London case, legislators in both the House and Senate hastily began working to prevent a similar occurrence here. Multiple bills have been introduced to protect property rights, ranging from specifically defining 'blight' to further restricting the usage of eminent domain to seize land.

In the tradition of improving public education in Florida, I have introduced a measure that is quickly gathering support across the nation called the "65-percent solution." It would require that school districts spend at least 65 percent of their funding within the classroom. I believe that as a whole, we are focusing too much on administrative and other non-classroom expenditures and not enough on the children and their classroom experience. If passed by the Legislature, Floridians will have the opportunity to finally stand up and demand where their tax payer money goes; to outrageous administrative costs and a fiscally impracticable class size constraint or to your children's' learning experience, high quality teacher recruitment and retention, and mandated smaller class sizes based on local control and flexibility.

Other education bills filed in 2006 worth noting include, legislation that would start the school year closer to Labor day, expand the eligibility of Florida Prepaid College program to more post-secondary institutions, and the Governor's A++ plan, which would reform middle and high schools with more rigorous curriculums to prepare students for the next level.

Though hundreds of bills will be heard, only those that are written in the best interest of Florida will pass. From legislation as small as preventing the sale of violent video games to minors to sharpening last year's historic Medicaid and Growth Management reforms, I assure you that 2006 will bring Florida positive results.

Most importantly, we represent you, the people of Florida, and are charged with designating over \$70 billion worth of **your** tax dollars. For this reason, I encourage and welcome your input over the course of the 60-day session. Please do not hesitate to contact my office to express an idea or an opinion or if I or my staff can answer any questions. My office numbers are (850) 487-5088, (772) 344-1140, or (561) 747-6922 and I can also be reached by e-mail at [PRUITT.KEN.WEB@flsenate.gov](mailto:PRUITT.KEN.WEB@flsenate.gov) .

Once again, it is a great honor to serve the people of Senate District 28.

- Ken Pruitt