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## President Office – Speech

### PRESIDENT GAETZ'S OPENING DAY REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

March 4, 2014

Florida Senate President Don Gaetz (R-Niceville) today delivered remarks before the Florida Senate marking the Opening Day of the 2014 Legislative Session. President Gaetz's remarks, as prepared for delivery, are below.

Every teacher, Senator Legg, Senator Thompson, Senator Bullard, Senator Hukill and even we old superintendents, Senator Montford, we all know what a midterm report means. Senator Detert, Senator Galvano, you know, when you have finished the front nine, it is still a long way to the clubhouse. Senator Gardiner, when you are 5K into that 10K run, it is just as far to go forward and finish as to turn around and go back. Senator Hays was a football player, a linebacker. He knows what half time is. It is the start of the second game. The only question is - do you start that second game ahead or behind. Well, here is the halftime score. With the run half done. Teeing off on the back nine. The midterm grades in the book. The Florida Senate is ahead, way ahead.

Already passed, already on the books of this Legislature, what has been called the most sweeping ethics reforms in 38 years. No less than Governor Reuben Askew, the father of open government, described what you did as "amazing, a miracle."

You have also begun the transformation that will lash Florida education to the realities and opportunities of the economy. In 2008 only 803 students, 803 students in the entire state of Florida, earned national industry certifications in our high schools. In 2013, you passed the Career and Professional Education Act. Because of that act, this year CAPE Students - in middle and high school - are enrolled in 1,915 CAPE academies earning 62,000 national industry certifications in aerospace, biomedicine, digital design, diesel mechanics and 236 more career-technical fields in demand today in Florida's recovering economy. Though many are from economically poor families, CAPE students are graduating at a higher rate with higher GPA's and getting better jobs with more pay than their peers. When you voted for the Career and Professional Education Act, you changed the lives of generations of Florida students, forever and for the better.

We had a good session last year. Results without rancor. Partnership more than partisanship. Each of us, all of us, had victories for the people who sent us here. I look into the faces of 39 Senators and see success. But Jeb Bush was right when he said, "reform is never finished and success is never final." That is why they make the back nine, the last lap, and the second semester.

Therefore, following the State of the State Address, I ask the Senate to come back to this floor and get down to business today.

There is a reason our priorities did not die in the House last year. We all worked our bills, but we also had someone working with us. We have a talented, trusted partner and friend across the Capitol Rotunda. The Speaker of the House, Will Weatherford. The Speaker has reached out to the Senate once more in an invitation to work together again on a 2014 Work Plan. On urgent priorities that cross the capitol, cross the aisle, and cross the state.

The first of those priorities is to protect Florida's most vulnerable.

Since the passage of the Jimmy Ryce Act, 594 sexual offenders have slipped out the side doors of the criminal justice and civil commitment systems. Gaps in the law, inconsistencies by state agencies, local law enforcement and prosecutors without the tools they need. Whatever the causes, one chilling consequence, 594 predators caught but then released to stalk, violate and murder our children again. Today, in this Senate, that will end. We cannot legislate the evil out of evildoers. But today four Senate committee chairs, bi-partisan, working together, will bring us the legislation that prosecutors, police, and parents have asked for. We will protect our children and we will scorch the earth against sexually violent predators. We cannot waste one more day. We cannot lose one more child.

This session we will also take up long overdue reforms to safeguard the elderly in Adult Living Facilities. We will reform a child welfare system so porous that 430 children known to DCF have disappeared or died in the last five years. We will toughen the laws against human trafficking and care for its victims. Our budget will increase funding for Child Advocacy Centers, ensure that every child caught in the court system has a guardian ad litem, and end the long critical needs waiting list of disabled children standing in line, or sitting in their wheelchairs waiting for services from the Agency for Persons With Disabilities.

Today, while we in the Senate are acting to make Florida the most unwelcome place in America for those who would harm our children, the House of Representatives this afternoon will take up the second of our Work Plan 2014 priorities, legislation to make Florida the most welcome place in America for our military, their missions, and their families.

What we are calling The Florida GI bill will:

- expand educational benefits for veterans;
- provide scholarships for our Florida National Guard members;
- help our returning and retiring military start businesses and get jobs;
- cut red tape so physicians leaving the military can practice in Florida immediately;
- make needed repairs and renovations to remaining National Guard armories within two years;
- and, go national with a campaign to recruit military families to make Florida their permanent home.

Our mission is to make Florida the Welcome Home State for our military and their families, the most military-friendly state in America.

The third shared House and Senate priority is to double down on transforming our education system into a pathway out of poverty and into jobs. I spoke of the extraordinary success of our Career and Professional Education academies. Now it is time to lift the course limit on career-technical education so more students, from middle school through college, can take more courses and earn more industry certifications. The pathway out of poverty is education - education that qualifies you for a job.

Our education committees will ask you to support the Board of Governors in establishing metrics of performance for our state universities and tying funding to that performance, so more students will actually earn degrees and those degrees will qualify graduates for real jobs.

It is time to end another waiting list. 10,000 low income families are waiting in line for their children to attend schools that meet their needs, schools of their choice. It is time to expand school choice by expanding the Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

School choice, financial accountability and student achievement are part of the same transformational policy. The performance of Tax Credit Scholarship students should be assessed just like the performance of any other child. Why? Because testing is not just about score-carding. It is about measuring academic progress so schools and teachers can customize instruction to meet individual students' needs, so parents will know how their children are really doing, so taxpayers can be sure how their money is used.

Another scholarship program deserves our support, as well. Every year the cost of a Florida Prepaid Scholarship for a university goes up by 15 percent. If you bought four year Florida Prepaid contract for a newborn today, the lump sum cost would be \$53,729. That price slams the door on the dreams of many parents and grandparents to help the children they love go to college. Our Work Plan calls for ending the automatic price increases, saving the average family \$10,000 on a newborn Prepaid contract and putting college within reach for more families with modest means.

Government accountability and efficiency, a smarter, cleaner government, is a moral imperative.

President Lee and Speaker Bense passed lobbyist compensation audits in 2005. They were never enforced. Now they are.

Today, Senator Thrasher will bring to the Senate floor a joint rule to ensure that legislators live among the people they represent.

This session we will consider legislation to apply higher ethical standards and greater disclosure to local government, special districts, statutorily created corporations and direct support organizations. They take public funds. They have a public responsibility. They must live up to the public trust.

And to those who have treated our ethics laws with contempt, refused to comply and then refused to pay their fines, I ask you to put teeth in the law so they can be removed from office.

Pension reform is one of the few issues that divides this Senate. There is nothing to be gained by taking the Senate down the same road as last year with the same results. So, I have asked the proponents of pension reform to compromise, to consider options different from last year's bill. I ask opponents to unfold their arms, roll up their sleeves and help craft a compromise. Here is the stubborn fact: annually the Florida Legislature appropriates \$500 million to subsidize the unfunded actuarial liability of our pension system. That is \$500 million that cannot be spent on the environment, or education, or health care, or left in taxpayers' own pockets. It is \$500 million off the top. For the sake of our future employees, for sake of our taxpayers, we should not be like Washington. We should look for a solution.

Work Plan 2014 includes a fifth priority, which Governor Scott has put into words everyone can understand: It's Your Money. Every dollar in Tallahassee is involuntarily extracted from the pockets and cash registers of the people of Florida. I ask you to stand with Governor Scott, Speaker Weatherford, President-designate Gardiner, and Budget Chair Negron and cut taxes by \$500 million this year. The centerpiece of our tax cut proposal will be a reduction of vehicle fees to help working families who drive their cars and trucks to school and to their jobs. In Washington, the debate is about which taxes to raise. In Florida, the debate is about which taxes to cut.

This, then, is our 2014 Work Plan:

- Broad-based tax cuts helping working families;
- A smarter, cleaner government, more efficient and more accountable;

- Education, transformed, so more students can graduate, so graduates can get better jobs, so Florida can be first in the nation in preparing our young people for success in the real economy;
- The Florida GI bill to make our state the number one "Welcome Home" state for America's military missions and military families;
- Protection for the most vulnerable, our children, our elderly, our abused, our disabled.

Your DNA is all over this 2014 Work Plan. So many senators have contributed, and will contribute, your designs, your improvements in committee, your bold ideas. This is truly our Work Plan. Bi-partisan and bi-cameral. I ask for your help to perfect and pass our Work Plan for Florida, and I promise you my help, for there are a hundred compelling ideas of yours already moving toward this floor.

Some say the second year of a presiding officer's term is not supposed to be ambitious. The recommendations are "soft landing," "quiet harbor", "risk averse." I commend to you instead the advice of Theodore Roosevelt who said that each of us is given his "crowded hour" to do great things even though risking failure, but to never be "with those poor spirits who live in the gray twilight of fear and indecision that knows neither victory nor defeat." Starting now we have 60 days. Let's fill them with crowded hours.



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