

Tampa Bay Times

2014 session built to promote Gov. Rick Scott's re-election



Steve Bousquet, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

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When the 2014 legislative session began, Senate and House leaders focused on a five-point "work plan."

Cut taxes. Support the troops. Make government more efficient. Improve schools. Protect the vulnerable.

But House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, and Senate President Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, left off the most obvious priority: protect Gov. Rick Scott, who faces a tough re-election fight.

It was part of the plan all along. A defeat in November would be a shattering blow to Florida Republicans.

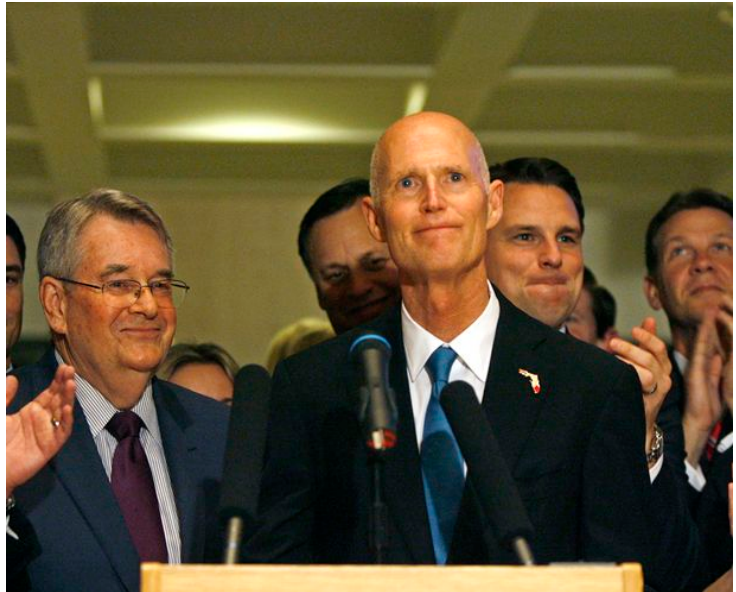
When the session ended late Friday, legislative leaders shamelessly celebrated their success at bolstering Scott's prospects as they put a punctuation mark on an election-year session that lays the groundwork for the forthcoming campaign.

"Everything he wanted going into this session, he got," Weatherford said. "I have every reason to believe this will jump-start him into the election cycle. It's going to be a really successful year for him going forward."

Scott plans a weeklong "help is on the way" tour of eight media markets, a victory lap to underscore the tax cut package. He'll be in Tampa on Tuesday.

The governor's abbreviated session agenda was designed to attract maximum popular appeal: a \$400 million rollback of auto tag fees, more money for education and a freeze on college tuition.

He got all three, and more.



With Weatherford taking the lead, and over Gaetz's strong opposition, the Legislature approved in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants at Florida colleges and universities.

Scott, who opposed the idea in the past, never pushed for it. He did not mention it in his March State of the State address, but he came awfully close, saying: "Our people are dreamers," and by calling three times for lower tuition fees.

In keeping with the plan, as lawmakers celebrated passage of the tuition bill Friday, Weatherford gave Scott all the credit for breaking a Senate logjam and for getting former Republican Govs. Bob Martinez and Jeb Bush to lobby for its passage.

"The bill would have never passed the Senate had the governor not engaged," Weatherford said. "Your ability to show compassion to these students . . . it's a testament to your leadership."

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but Weatherford's mention of Scott's "compassion" came a day after a statewide poll by Quinnipiac University said that voters consider Scott's probable Democratic challenger, Charlie Crist, more compassionate by a 15-point margin.

Scott repeatedly used the session to blast Crist's record as governor, blaming him for 15 percent annual tuition increases and for hiking automobile tag fees during a recession.

"If they thought it was such a great idea to repeal the fees, why did they wait so long?" Crist said. "We never intended for them to be there forever."

Crist noted that the higher fees, enacted in September 2009, were in effect for a much longer period under Scott than under him.

Democrats say the 2014 session is another case of Scott abdicating his responsibility to the Legislature, which set the agenda and refused an expansion of Medicaid that Scott endorsed a year ago.

"We're kicking important issues down the road so he (Scott) can have an election where he can say, 'It's great.' It's not great," said Rep. Perry Thurston, D-Plantation, the House minority leader. "I think it's gamesmanship."

For years, Democrats supported in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants. When the Republicans finally embraced the idea, Thurston called it election-year pandering, but added: "Don't get me wrong. I think it's a good thing."

What the Legislature failed to do dovetails with the Democrats' campaign strategy.

"Not expanding Medicaid was a terrible thing. I can't believe they didn't do that," Crist said in an interview. "A million Floridians will not be getting health care because of their lack of compassion."

Crist wants Scott to veto much of the pork-barrel spending in the \$77.1 billion budget and call lawmakers back for a special session to steer the money into education.

But Crist's criticism of the budget is weakened by the fact that most Democrats in the Legislature voted for it.

"My suspicion is that they wanted to get things funded that they cared about," Crist said of Democratic lawmakers. "But I can't believe how big that budget is."

In his fourth year in office, Scott has still not quite figured out how to work with the Legislature, but he showed signs of improvement this spring. He benefited greatly from the work of Lt. Gov. Carlos Lopez-Cantera, a former Miami legislator and House majority leader, who maintained open lines of communication with lawmakers.

The governor rubbed elbows in public with legislators several times during the session, something he didn't do

at all a year earlier. But the feeling wasn't always mutual.

Gaetz, the Senate president, pointed out that cutting auto tag fees originated in the Senate in 2013, and that neither Scott nor the Department of Children and Families advocated changes in child protection laws to reduce deaths of children in state supervision, one of the major bills passed this year.

"The agency didn't come to us and say, 'Reform us,' " Gaetz said. "The governor didn't ask us to do that. The people of Florida asked us to do that."

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