

**The Florida Senate**  
**Remarks by Senate President Jeff Atwater**  
**March 3, 2009**  
**Opening Day**  
**Tallahassee, FL**

*As prepared for delivery*

As we open this 111<sup>th</sup> session of the Florida Senate, let me take this moment to thank all those who have traveled here to share with us in the honored traditions of opening day.

I want to thank especially the spouses and families of our members who sacrifice daily so that their loved ones can participate in, and contribute to, the great deliberations of this body. Your willingness to share and support those of us in this Chamber means much more than we can adequately express.

I would also like to acknowledge our partners in the Governor's Office and the Florida House. Governor Crist's love of Florida goes beyond party or politics, and his vision for our state and its future is uplifting and inspiring. He has taken the lead on building a cleaner, greener Florida for future generations and in his powerful support of Florida's small business economy. Governor Crist shares a deep connection with Floridians from every walk of life, and I salute him as a good friend and a strong leader.

Representative Cretul has stepped into the Speaker's role under unique and challenging circumstances, and has done so with dignity, grace and humility.

The leadership that both the Governor and the Speaker have demonstrated to date auger well for the solid working relationship that will be needed over the next nine weeks. I thank them both for their support and look forward to working with them.

Members, welcome back.

I know that each of you – no matter where you call home, to which party you belong or what philosophy drives you – is as honored as I am to serve the people of this great state.

Each of you brings a spirit and determination to make Florida the very best state it can be, and I am honored and inspired by your commitment to the people of our great state.

As we worked through the special session and the subsequent weeks of committee meetings, and as we reassemble in this regular session, our deliberations have been shaped by two distinct sets of obligations.

First, we have been confronted with an enormous fiscal challenge, and a constitutional obligation to balance Florida's budget.

At the beginning of Special Session, I shared with you some sobering economic statistics. We continue to hear how our economic circumstances have further deteriorated over the intervening weeks. I have

been consistently impressed by the gravity with which every one of you took the data and information to heart.

I have spoken before of our second obligation – the unwritten, but no less crucial, moral obligation to act on principle, with clarity and honesty.

We must have the courage to speak forthrightly to Floridians and recognize that they have the capacity and the will to accept the truth and assess the facts. These are the obligations of integrity and trust that leaders share with the people they serve.

During times such as these, with resources frighteningly scarce, we must lead with ideals, letting them shape our political conversations. We must establish principled baselines first, and let our subsequent actions be guided by them. We have an obligation to the citizens of Florida to deliver value, not just services. That is the litmus test we must apply.

We cannot let harsh economic realities deter us from clearly defining our value equations.

The special character of Florida's environment can be protected even in times of economic austerity. We will hold ourselves to ideals that will unshackle the small business economy, reduce the stifling hand of regulation on entrepreneurs and ignite a fundamental transformation of our economy. We can build intellectual capital from within and create a state where hard work and brilliant minds can establish careers, raise families and transform Florida into the economic powerhouse of a new knowledge economy.

Senators, transforming Florida's future begins with preparing Florida's children to own the future. Investing in a quality education is vital to building intellectual capital. We must ensure that Florida's next entrepreneur, next small business owner, next scientist, is today receiving the educational training necessary for him or her to succeed in life.

I commit to you to do everything in my ability to prevent further spending cuts to Florida's classrooms, but I need your help. We must examine every area of spending - is there a program, a service, a board or commission or a mountain of unread reports and studies that if suspended or eliminated would provide additional funding for classrooms?

Senators, I said this in the Special Session and I say it again today - if it doesn't house, teach, feed, protect, heal or create a job for a Floridian, then this is the time to end it. If it does house, teach, feed, protect, heal or create a new job for a Floridian then this is the time to make it work better than ever before.

Members, since 2004, state spending has increased 20%. Has the increase in spending created a commensurate increase in student achievement or enabled us to responsibly address the needs of the elderly, the mentally ill, those most at risk in our society - or do we merely feel better for having spent the money?

This is both an opportunity and an obligation for the Florida Senate. To dig deep inside every budget line item, to critically assess everything we do and ask the hard questions. We have begun this task and I want to thank Chairman Alexander and our Appropriations committee chairs – Senators Crist, Wise, Lynn, Fasano, Baker, and Peadar – for the leadership they have shown in having their committees diligently and thoroughly analyze the base budget down to every line item and every dollar allocated.

Senator Alexander will introduce legislation designed to enhance transparency, which will provide increased accountability in government spending. He will also submit legislation to bring accountability and clarity to how Florida commits its resources. This legislation is the first step to ensure we hold ourselves and every function of government to the highest standards of performance and the most rigorous tests of necessity.

A case in point is the Federal stimulus package – a one-time, stop-gap measure. We will deploy Medicaid, infrastructure, and education dollars, if waivers are granted - and remain hopeful that the effects of the stimulus will benefit Floridians immediately.

However, even with modest economic recovery, state projections paint a sobering picture: balancing our budget on non-recurring dollars, without reductions in spending or new sources of revenue, will leave us with a bigger budget gap three years from now than the one we face today.

I am not advocating a budget balancing solution based purely on reductions or new taxes. I have said that everything must be on the table. While we are reviewing every line item in every budget we are also reviewing our tax structure and our capacity for future borrowing.

Florida does not have a day or a dollar to waste.

There are a hundred reasons why the task is too big, why the decisions are too hard, why the issues are too tough.

None of us, as we sat at our kitchen tables and asked our families to support our efforts to pursue public service, thought we would be called upon to lead in times like these. None of us bargained for this.

But, neither did one in thirteen of our neighbors who have now lost their homes.

Nor did one in twelve of our neighbors who today are unemployed.

Nor did one in ten of our fellow Floridians who are now dependent on food stamps...

They didn't bargain for this either.

We did not choose it. We did not cause it. But Senators, we are obliged to confront it.

From this chair I can see each of you, I know something of your struggles and successes, the paths you have worn down and the obstacles you have climbed over to earn your place here...there is strength in this Chamber.

Our success now rests in our ability to unite our stories and our experiences to find solutions. Not Republican solutions, not Democrat solutions, but Florida solutions.

The budget, jobs and the helping Florida families in the face of the national economic downturn will rightfully be the focus of most of the discussions; however we must not lose sight of the opportunity we have to introduce policy reforms. In doing so we will draw again on the wisdom found in this very Chamber.

Due to the vision and leadership of President Pruitt no child with the capacity and potential to learn will be denied the brighter future that comes with an advanced education.

Due to the unwavering commitment of Senator Wilson young men and their futures are championed by community leaders, teachers, and business owners determined to mentor and challenge them to become success stories for their neighborhood.

President King and Senator Ring's perseverance in the area of biomedical research and technology have positioned Florida as a magnet for capital investment, national grants and international acclaim. I am confident that Florida will be the place where cancer is cured, Alzheimer's arrested and Multiple Sclerosis subdued.

Leader Lawson and Senator Constantine have dedicated their careers to environmental protection – ensuring that our exceptional and irreplaceable ecosystems are protected for generations to come

Members, I could go on and on – each of you has invested time, talent, and skills making Florida a better place to live.

I am honored to work at your side in this time of great challenge. You are statesmen and women, blessed with the insights, skills and political courage to succeed in this effort.

From Miami to Pensacola, from Jacksonville to Tampa, from Orlando to Ft. Myers, from Marianna to Yulee, from Dunnellon to St. Cloud, from Port Charlotte to Homestead, our economy is struggling and Florida's families are hurting.

But even in these times, Florida is the magnificent jewel of this nation.

Our people are good and kind, strong and resilient, entrepreneurial and hardworking.

In times such as these we must hearken back to the principles, courage, and values of those who forged this great nation, pioneered the Florida wilderness and shaped our story. They were not motivated by polls or politics; they were driven by ideals and values.

A great 19<sup>th</sup> century American statesman, Carl Schurz, declared “Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them you will reach your destiny.”

On your desks is a box, and inside is a sextant, a navigational tool utilized by explorers from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the darkest of nights, tumbling on the most perilous seas, captains would take up their sextant and with the stars as their guide they would chart their position, adjust their course and press onward in their journey to make and capture their destiny.

Ideals are indeed like stars. If we are faithful, guided by principles, and remain true our course, we will not be lost. Florida's prospects for the future are bright and our bold destiny is yet unwritten. This is our challenge. To shut out the extraneous noises that would pull us off course, and remain faithful to our ideals and that which we hold most dear.

Let us discover anew our destiny and let history judge this generation of Florida's leaders as those who charted their course on a higher path.

On this day of celebration, the anniversary of our statehood, we celebrate the first steps Florida took as a member of this great union. In keeping with those who came before us, who embraced difficult times as opportunities to shape a more prosperous Florida, let us join together in taking up that work anew with willing hands and strong hearts.

Happy Birthday Florida - May God always bless the great state of Florida.