

THIS WEEK IN THE FLORIDA SENATE

MARCH 27 - 31, 2017

Senate Budget Prioritizes Education, State Employees, and Reserves

The Senate Committee on Appropriations filed Senate Proposed Bill 2500, a proposed budget for the 2017-18 fiscal year. The budget prioritizes funding for Florida's Pre-K – 20 public education system with unprecedented K – 12 per student funding and key investments in higher education; all while setting aside more than \$3 billion in total reserves.

The Senate's fiscally responsible, balanced budget ensures that we live within our means and set aside an ample rainy day fund. This budget meets the needs of our growing state in a manner that reflects the priorities of Floridians. The link between education and our economy is clear. The best thing we can do to invest in Florida's future is to make certain all Florida children have access to a great education from voluntary pre-kindergarten, all the way through our excellent institutions of higher education.

Over the last ten years, our universities have added approximately 50,000 students. During that time, state funding has grown by only \$142 million, yet student tuition has nearly doubled. While it is true that Florida's tuition rates are lower than in other states, nearly doubling the cost of tuition has pushed the hope of higher education out of reach for too many students and their families. In total, the Senate's budget increases need-based student aid by 81 percent, while merit-based aid increases by 79 percent. With these historic investments in student financial aid, the Senate budget reflects our commitment to expand access to our State University System for all students who earn the right to attend.

Additionally, the budget also makes critical investments in Florida's state workforce with salary increases for state employees. For far too long, the honorable and dedicated state employees who guard prisons, protect our highways, care for abused and neglected children, and who provide many other critical government services, have gone without an increase in their pay. The Senate budget makes it clear that we value the contributions these public servants make to our state.

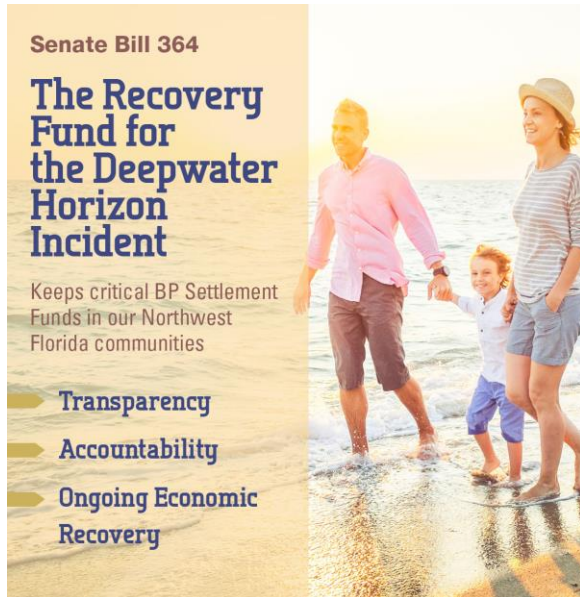
Senate Passes Comprehensive Gaming Legislation

The Senate passed Senate Bill 8, Gaming, which provides the needed certainty and predictability in our state gaming policies. The legislation ratifies the 2015 Compact executed by the Governor, with modifications that ensures we honor the will of our fellow citizens in the eight counties that have approved referenda to expand the availability of gaming options.

This legislation builds on work that has taken place and input received by the Senate over the last several years. The bill covers all aspects of gaming in our state in a comprehensive manner, addressing industry instability caused by antiquated and ambiguous provisions of current law. It renews our ongoing revenue-sharing agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and recognizes the authority of local voters. Passing Senate Bill 8 is an important step towards finalizing a statewide approach that respects all stakeholders, while modernizing Florida's gaming laws, and maximizing revenues to the state for education, healthcare and infrastructure.

Legislation to Keep BP Oil Funds in Northwest Florida Advances

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Tourism, and Economic Development passed Senate Bill 364, The Recovery Fund for the Deepwater Horizon Incident. The legislation will ensure funds received in the settlement of the state's economic damage claims caused by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill remain in Northwest Florida's eight disproportionately affected counties.



The eight Florida counties disproportionately affected by the Deepwater Horizon Spill include: Bay, Escambia, Franklin, Gulf, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Walton, and Wakulla.

In 2013, the Florida Senate developed legislation (Senate Bill 1024), which created Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc. to ensure that economic damage settlement funds coming to the state would be properly accounted for and would benefit the eight disproportionately affected counties. Pursuant to this legislation, the Triumph Gulf Coast Board is responsible for utilizing the settlement proceeds to promote job creation through lasting economic development.

Under current law, the eight disproportionately affected counties are to receive 75 percent of all economic damage settlement funds received by the state. Senate Bill 364 appropriates the initial settlement payment directly to Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc., and appropriates future settlement payments directly to Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc., no later than 30 days after they are received by the state. Furthermore, Senate Bill 364 makes it clear that settlement funds should be transferred directly to Triumph Gulf Coast, Inc. and provides the necessary checks and balances needed.

Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day: March 30, 2017

The United States Department of Defense is commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War by honoring veterans of the war for their brave and dedicated service. Similarly, pursuant to a resolution issued by the Governor and Cabinet, in honor of the veterans of the war, March 30, 2017, was officially recognized as Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day.

Additionally, the state of Florida has honored Vietnam War veterans by constructing the Florida Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Tallahassee, producing a Vietnam War Veteran license plate, and assisting Vietnam War veterans with obtaining high school diplomas for draftees who were unable to complete their education.

Florida, the most military and veteran friendly state in the nation, is currently home to more than 506,000 Vietnam-era veterans. In Florida, we proudly welcomed home our Vietnam War veterans 50 years ago, and per this resolution, all are encouraged to participate in local Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day activities, honoring those who served so courageously.

