THE FLORIDA SENATE

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President

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Rural Renaissance Legislation Filed Ahead of 2026 Legislative Session

Bill creates opportunities for infrastructure improvements, education, & health care enhancements in rural communities across the Sunshine State

Tallahassee–Senator Corey Simon (R-Tallahassee) today filed Senate Bill (SB) 250, Rural Communities, a comprehensive package of legislative proposals designed to create a modern-day renaissance in rural communities across Florida. The bill creates opportunities for rural communities to expand education offerings, increase health care services, and modernize commerce. SB 250 also invests in farm-to-market roads to support Florida's vital agricultural supply chain.

"As we prepare to embark on a nationwide celebration of America's 250th Anniversary, there is no better time to celebrate and renew our focus on heritage farming communities across our state and nation. The hard work and patriotism of small family farm communities not only helped win our independence but also created and maintained a robust agricultural supply chain vital to our national security," said Senate President Ben Albritton (R-Wauchula). "With the support of Secretary Rollins and the USDA, we look forward to continued work with the Trump Administration to make Florida's Rural Renaissance a national model for rural prosperity whereby local communities across the nation can grow and prosper as they see fit. In fact, several provisions of Rural Renaissance are included in Florida's application for federal health care funding for rural communities made available through President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill."

"Quality of life in rural areas can be impacted by access to job opportunities, education and health care. Rural Renaissance combines enhancements to the traditional infrastructure for schools and hospitals with innovations that drastically expand opportunities for education, commerce, and health care in rural Florida," said Senator Simon who represents 12 rural counties across Florida's Panhandle and Big Bend. "We know commerce and capital are attracted to strong transportation infrastructure and robust public services, which will provide the chance for rural communities to prosper and grow while maintaining a time-honored way of life that has been highly sought after generation after generation. The free state of Florida is leading the way, and we won't leave our rural communities behind."

SB 250 – FLORIDA'S RURAL RENAISSANCE

Increases Support and Partnerships with Rural Communities

Modernizes Support for Fiscally-Constrained Counties to Account for Inflation
Many communities are growing out of the current definitions in Florida law for rural and fiscally constrained counties (FCC), either due to population increases or increases in the amount of property taxes raised. The bill modernizes these definitions. For example, the bill increases the FCC threshold (set in 2006) from a county that raises $5 million in property tax revenue per 1 mil, to $10 million per 1 mil.

Currently, a distribution from the tax collected on direct-to-home satellite service is provided to fiscally constrained counties that participate in the half-cent sales tax program. FCCs are estimated to receive a total distribution of $10.2 million in FY 2025-2026. The allocation among the several FCCs is based on a formula that uses a county's millage rate, population, and school taxable value. FCCs may use these funds for any public purpose except for debt service.

The bill increases the total distribution to no less than $50 million per fiscal year and changes the revenue source from the tax on direct-to-home satellite service to a sales tax, aligning the distribution for FCCs with the overall state economy. The bill also changes the allocation formula to use sales tax collections, per capita personal income, and population. Finally, the bill adds spending requirements. Specifically, 50% of the distribution must be used for public safety, 30% for infrastructure, and 20% for any public purpose. Debt service is not allowed.

Due to the new distribution for FCCs from the state's General Revenue Fund, the entire portion of the tax collected on direct-to-home satellite service that is earmarked for deposit into the Local Government Half-Cent Sales Tax Trust Fund is made available to all participating counties. In addition to the new $50 million General Revenue distribution created in the bill, FCCs will also benefit from a share of the estimated $10 million now becoming available to all participating counties.

Creates the Office of Rural Prosperity
The bill creates the Office of Rural Prosperity at the Department of Commerce to provide technical assistance to rural communities. The Office will promote and facilitate statewide planning assistance for local governments, serving as a robust resource for rural local governments with dedicated regional staff. Personnel will be permanently assigned to regional rural community liaison centers across the state to engage with locals and facilitate access to resources. They will aid local governments in accessing state and federal resources and conduct routine trainings on the requirements of the Community Planning Act and other relevant state and federal legislation.

The Office will create and maintain an interactive tool, the "Rural Resource Directory," designed to help rural local governments navigate state and federal grants and resources. OPPAGA will review the effectiveness of the Office of Rural Prosperity every three years, after an annual

review for the initial three years. The bill also modernizes the existing Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) statute and rural local government strategy.

Establishes Renaissance Grants for Counties with Declining Population
A subset of our rural communities has lost population over the last decade (Gadsden, Hardee, Hamilton, Taylor, Jackson, Calhoun, and Liberty Counties), resulting in declining business activity. The bill creates a $1 million block grant for each of the seven counties with declining population. Each county must develop a plan to use the funds with the goal of population growth. Use of these funds will be audited. The grant will be awarded annually until the county sees three consecutive years of population growth.

Funds for Rural Public Infrastructure Innovations
To facilitate the use of innovative, cost-saving technologies that will help rural governments save time and money, the bill creates a competitive application process for organizations with at least three years of experience in bringing innovations to local communities. Funds will help rural governments test and use new technologies.

Enhances Rural Economic Development Initiatives
Local or regional economic development community partners in rural communities can apply for grants to help cover the cost of site preparation marketing, and training opportunities to further economic development initiatives. Further, by working with the Office and updating REDI functions, attention to rural areas will increase the likelihood that goals are maximized and successful.

Adds Small Business Development Center Circuit Riders
Growing small businesses fosters a sense of community and attracts people and commerce to the community as it grows. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) currently funds staff in rural areas to "ride the circuit" of their region and work with local governments and communities to bring services, including access to capital, technical assistance, and other small business services.

SDBC is a federal program that utilizes federal funding and matching funds from local state college partners. The bill appropriates $1 million to increase circuit riders and reach more communities through this program.

Maximizes Options for Rural Housing

Raises Minimum Allocations for SHIP to Jump Start Rural Housing Options
Currently allocations are population-based, with the minimum allocation for each county within the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program set at $350,000. The bill increases the minimum allocation for each county to $1 million, providing additional funding to rural communities.

Preserves Rental Housing in Rural Communities
The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently offers more than 14,000 subsidized rental units across more than 300 properties in the state, the vast majority of which are located in rural areas. USDA-financed properties are approaching the end of their use restrictions and are at risk of becoming market-rate rental housing. To preserve these units as affordable rentals, the bill appropriates funds for rehabilitation or acquisition for owners who agree to maintain the properties as affordable housing.

Enhances Rural Transportation and Broadband Infrastructure

Expands Rural Infrastructure Fund
The Rural Infrastructure Fund (RIF) facilitates planning, preparing, and financing of infrastructure projects in rural communities to encourage job creation and capital investment in rural economies. Rural communities can use RIF funds as a match for other infrastructure funding programs. Currently, the program is appropriated a minimum of $5 million annually. The bill increases the recurring appropriation to $10 million, with an additional one-time infusion of $40 million.

Increases Rural Revolving Loan Program Funding
The Rural Revolving Loan Program was created by the Legislature in 1996 to facilitate the use of existing federal, state, and local financial resources by providing local governments with access to funds to promote the economic viability of rural communities. The program is intended to be highly flexible, and loan amounts vary depending on applicant needs. Currently, the program receives $420,000 annually. The bill increases recurring funding to a total of $1.4 million, with an additional one-time infusion of $4 million. Because these are loans, these funds will be leveraged by rural communities many times.

Improves Coordination for Federal Broadband Programs
Broadband access has become a critical quality of life issue, with high-speed internet serving as a gateway to commerce, education, and health care. Florida is set to receive $1.2 billion in federal funding through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, in addition to other federal funds allocated to broadband, including $366 million from the federal Capital Project Fund and $400 million in pandemic funds appropriated by the Legislature to the Broadband Opportunity Program.

The bill improves coordination and technical assistance between the Office of Broadband at the Department of Commerce and rural or underserved communities in need of broadband services.

Historic Commitment to Farm to Market Roads
The bill creates the Florida Arterial Road Modernization (FARM) Program, amending existing statutes for arterial rural highway projects to incorporate funding for roads used primarily as farm-to-market connections between rural agricultural areas and market distribution centers.

The bill creates a new distribution specifically for arterial roads from existing documentary stamp revenues by redirecting $30 million from unallocated funds collected through Documentary Stamps to the State Transportation Trust Fund (STTF). With existing funding of $20 million annually, this results in a $50 million annual investment in arterial roads.

Expands Small County Road Assistance Program
The Small County Road Assistance Program (SCRAP) assists small county governments in resurfacing and reconstructing county roads. The bill redirects a portion of vehicle title fees, currently directed to the state's general revenue fund, to the STTF to increase funding available for the program. The Department of Transportation (DOT) is currently required to expend $25 million on the program, and this redirect doubles the state's investment in these counties.

Creates Rural Transit Block Grant Program
The bill creates a new rural transit operating block grant program. This program is similar to the existing public transit block grant program; however rural transit operating block grants are only available to providers not eligible to receive funding under to the existing public transit block grant program. The FDOT must annually allocate at least $3 million from the State Transportation Trust Fund for this program. Each eligible provider must annually receive at least $20,000 in grant funds. Grant funds are distributed pursuant a formula based on county population, revenue miles, and passenger data of eligible providers.

Improves Education Opportunities in Rural Communities

Expands Regional Education Consortia
Current education regional consortium service organizations include the Northeast Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC); Panhandle Area Educational Consortium (PAEC); and Heartland Educational Consortium (HEC), which serve small, rural school districts to reduce overhead administrative costs, minimize duplication of services, promote new programs, and provide personnel and programmatic support.

School districts with 20,000 or fewer students, lab schools, and the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind may enter into cooperative agreements to form a regional consortium service organization. Each regional consortium receives a $50,000 grant per school district and eligible member, to be used for the delivery of services within the participating school districts. The consortium board of directors, composed of the superintendents of the participating school districts, determines the services and use of funds. The bill increases the consortia funding per eligible member from $50,000 to $150,000 and appropriates recurring funding for this investment.

Creates Regional Consortium Service Organization Supplemental Services Program
The bill creates a grant program administered by the three regional consortium service organizations to supplement member needs related to transportation; district finance personnel services; property insurance; cybersecurity support; school safety; college, career, and workforce development; academic support; and behavior support within exceptional student education services.

Updates Special Facility Construction Account
The Special Facility Construction Account (SFCA) provides construction funds to school districts that have urgent construction needs but lack sufficient resources and have no reasonable expectation of raising needed funds over the next three years through tax revenue. Typically, the projects that receive funds through the SFCA are located in rural areas with insufficient tax base to fund large construction projects.

A school district receiving funding must levy the maximum discretionary millage (1.5 mills) for three years before making a request and until project completion. Of that levy, the school district must pay the value of 1 mill per year to the project. These funds are collected by the Department of Education, leaving participating districts with limited ability to pay for other fixed capital outlay needs. The bill authorizes a school district that receives funds through the SFCA to retain its entire 1.5 mill discretionary ad valorem levy.

Adds a Student Loan Repayment Program for Rural Educators
The bill creates the Rural Incentive for Professional Educators (RIPE) program to help small counties attract and retain instructional personnel and administrators. The program provides an annual benefit for educators who reside in and work as instructional employees or administrators at public or private schools in a fiscally constrained county.

Participants receive up to $15,000 in total student loan repayment assistance over five years, disbursed in annual payments not to exceed $3,000 per year.

Expands Access to Health Care in Rural Florida

Growing Doctors and Nurses in Rural Areas
Rural communities in Florida have limited access to medical care. As a result, these communities are home to more people with medically complex needs, which, if addressed through preventative and primary care, could significantly improve quality of life and reduce costs for families. Physicians, physician assistants and autonomous APRNs might be more willing to relocate to rural areas with grant funding to establish primary care practices.

Existing financial incentive programs (e.g. Florida Reimbursement Assistance for Medical Education (FRAME)) do not fund facility construction, acquisition, renovation, or lease; medical equipment and furnishings; or information technology. All of these are needed to establish a practice. The bill creates a new grant program to help start-up offices and practices for physicians, physician assistants, and autonomous APRNs in rural areas.

The bill also expands the existing FRAME program to include medical doctors or osteopathic doctors who are board certified or board eligible in emergency medicine and who are employed by or under contract with a rural hospital or rural emergency hospital.

Training Rural Paramedics and EMTs in Advanced Stroke, Cardiac, and Obstetrics Response
Stroke, Cardiac, and Obstetrics patients in rural Florida face challenges including limited access to hospitals, fewer resources, and a lack of advanced treatments. These challenges can lead to worse health outcomes and higher mortality rates.

The bill establishes the Stroke, Cardiac, and Obstetric Response and Education (SCORE) Grant Program within the Department of Health to increase access to high-quality stroke, cardiac, and obstetric care through the application of technology and innovative training for medical professionals who provide emergency care, including EMTs and other first responders.
Expands Rural Hospital Grant Program to Cover Mobile Units and Telemedicine Kiosks
The Rural Hospital Capital Improvement Program provides critical funding to rural hospitals to acquire, repair, improve, and upgrade systems, facilities, or equipment. The state budget currently includes $10 million in recurring funding for these grants.

The bill adds $25 million in nonrecurring funding to meet the growing needs of rural hospitals. Funds will cover mobile units to provide primary care services, behavioral health services, and obstetric and gynecological services, as well as telemedicine kiosks for remote urgent care services in rural areas.

Increases Existing Medicaid Payments for Rural Hospitals
In Florida, five rural hospitals have closed, primarily due to financial challenges. A "critical access hospital" (CAH) must be located in a rural area and outside a certain distance from other hospitals. Federal Medicare recognizes this distinction and provides higher payments for Medicare services provided at these hospitals. However, Florida Medicaid reimbursement does not recognize CAH status.

The bill appropriates additional funding to enhance Medicaid payments to reimburse rural hospitals that provide care for the current Medicaid population, similar to Medicare reimbursement.

Rural Renaissance Appropriations – $217.9 million

- Renaissance Grants – $7 million
- Office of Rural Prosperity – $2.4 million
- Preserving Rental Housing in Rural Communities – $30 million
- Rural Strategy Grants – $250,000
- Rural Infrastructure Fund – $50 million (inclusive of base funding)
- Rural Revolving Loan Program – $5.4 million (inclusive of base funding)
- Innovations for Rural Counties – $500,000
- Small Business Development Center Network – $1 million

- Student Loan Repayment for Rural Educators – $7 million
- Regional Education Consortia – Increase from $50,000 to $150,000 per district – $5.4 million
- Regional Education Consortia Grants – $25 million
- Rural Hospital Medicaid Enhancement – $7.7 million state, $10.3 million federal (additional funds, based on most recent estimate)
- Rural Hospital Improvement Grants – $30 million
- Stroke, Cardiac, and Obstetric Response and Education – $5 million
- Doctor/PA/APRN Start Up Program – $25 million

General Revenue Redirects in the Bill

- Fiscally Constrained Counties – approximately $50.7 million (based on most recent estimate)
- Direct-to-Home Satellite Tax – approximately $10.2 million
- Farm-to-Market Roads – $50 million State Transportation Trust Fund
- Small County Road Assistance Program – approximately $49.6 million State Transportation Trust Fund (based on most recent estimate)

Additional Funding for General Appropriations Act

- State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program – $18.8 million

For more information, please visit www.FLSeante.gov.

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