



STATE SENATOR GARY M. FARMER, JR

DISTRICT 34

Legislative Session 2017

Newsletter



"I was incredibly proud this year to spend my first session in Tallahassee representing the people of Broward County as well as the interests of our state as a whole. It was a heck of a year to be a first time elected official! Despite promises of unprecedented transparency, it was the exact opposite – many major policy initiatives were crafted and negotiated outside of the public, deliberative committee process. And due to the political makeup of both the State House and the State Senate, as well as the views of the current Governor, we are not in a situation where the values of Broward County are likely to be reflected in the legislation that makes its way through our State Capitol.

Nevertheless, I made it my goal to be sure that Broward County's voice was heard in every stage of the process in Tallahassee this session. While there were many ugly bills that our legislature passed, I believe that my efforts this session were not in vain, as we managed to make some bad bills just a little bit better, and started conversations about several important issues that our legislature needs to urgently address. In this newsletter, you will find some of the issues that I worked on this session. If you have any other questions or ideas for things that you would like to see done in our state government, I would encourage you to reach out to myself or my staff with the contact information listed in this newsletter."

- Gary

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Committee Assignments

- Banking and Insurance
- Education
- Environmental Preservation and Conservation
- Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education
- Appropriations Subcommittee on Pre-K - 12 Education



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Protecting Public Education



• **Properly funding our Public Schools:** Through and through, the most controversial and exhausting issue considered this Session was the debate over the future of public education in Florida. The Legislature took up many bills, most of them with poor policy attached; most of those bills languished in committee, and some were even voted down. However, the end-all bill that both bodies considered in the waning days of Session, and into the Extended Session, is HB 7069. Referred to as the “education train,” HB 7069 became a “conforming bill” for the budget, only for public consideration in the final days of the Session. Generally, conforming bills guide the implementation of certain spending programs within a piece of the budget; they are not supposed to be vehicles, more major policy changes or initiatives. But this year, that’s exactly what they did – included in a 278 page conforming bill the policy found in 55 other substantive bills, with very little to no public discussion, debate or deliberation

on these issues. If enacted, HB 7069 will bring significant harm to our traditional public schools by: reducing funding for our public schools by limiting State funds for building maintenance and construction; forcing school districts to share county funding with private charter school operators for building maintenance; removing city and county control over charter school building locations; increasing per-pupil spending by less than the combined increased cost of education; as well as many other terrible things. Perhaps worst of all, the drafters of HB 7069 did not consider input by the public or other elected officers in the Legislature before forcing an up or down vote on the floors of both chambers. I fought this bill, both procedurally and in debate, throwing every obstacle I could in its way. Unfortunately, our divided Senate voted 20 to 18 in favor of bill, sending it to the Governor. If not too late, I implore you to contact the Governor and urge him to veto HB 7069.

• **Building our State Colleges and Universities:** In the same vein as properly funding our traditional public schools, so too did I work to fund our public colleges and universities. A combination of bills accomplished a part of that goal. State Universities now have increased funding for both their own research programs, as well as tuition assistance for the academically driven students in their midst. For the first time in over a decade, the one hundred percent Bright Future’s scholarship program is fully funded. That means that every student qualifying for that scholarship will receive complete tuition credit as well as \$300 per year for books. Additionally, another state university, the University of Central Florida, received “emerging preeminent” status with the state, providing additional funding for academic programs in that institution. Unfortunately, our state colleges did not fair quite as well. I fought to keep funding for our distinguished state and community colleges at current levels. Colleges such as Broward College, a national finalist for the Aspen Award for Community College Excellence, deserve the same dignity and respect befitting our best state universities. Despite this setback, I will continue working with our State education experts to properly fund our state and community colleges next year.



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Gun Safety Legislation

While running to represent you I pledged to prioritize the enactment of common-sense gun safety reform in our State. Florida is one of several states leading the nation in rising gun-related crime. It also contains several major holes and other critical flaws in the statutes governing firearms use and ownership. I believe these two points are interconnected, and thus proposed several bills in the 2017 Session aimed at addressing them.

- **Trigger Lock Legislation:** Currently in Florida, there are serious cracks in the laws regarding the storage of firearms in the presence of children. Over the course of this year alone, nine children have been killed with firearms, and another 33 children have been injured. Many of these tragedies occur because of improperly stored firearms, with children inadvertently harming themselves or others as a result. With this in mind, I proposed SB 142, a bill relating to the safe storage of firearms where children are present. My bill, which gained attention statewide, would require all firearms to either be stored in a safe or lock box, or with a trigger lock if child is going to be present, and would eliminate a broad loophole that currently exists. This would reduce the number of tragic incidents involving children and firearms. While the Republicans in the State Senate refused to hear the bill, I will continue to pursue this issue next session.

REDUCING INSURANCE RATES

- **Ensuring Consumer Rights:** Every insurance policyholder has the right to be made whole in the event of an accident or disaster. It is because of this that Florida statutes guarantee that when an insurance company wrongfully denies or limits a policyholder's claim, the policyholder who was forced to sue to get their benefits is also entitled to have their attorney's fees paid for by their insurer. This ensures that when a policyholder is forced to fight for their rightful claim, they are made whole, without losing a portion of that to the costs associated with litigating the claim. Unfortunately, insurance companies, including Citizens Insurance Corporation, take the fees that they are have to pay out when they lose a case and build them into the rates that they charge their policyholders, essentially charging innocent policyholders for their own mistakes or wrongdoing. My bill (SB 1684) would bar insurance companies from passing their losing costs along to the consumer by including them in the rate base. This would result in a decrease in insurance rates, as well as create an incentive for insurance companies to pay rightful claims in a prompt and timely manner.

Righting the Wrongs of Civil Injustice

- **Clemency for the Groveland Four:** One of Florida's darkest moments in history was the wrongful death and conviction of the Groveland Four. Over sixty-five years ago, four black men were wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. A mob murdered one man before trial, while another was killed while in police custody, and another was subject to an unfair trial. This session I sponsored historic legislation to right this civil injustice, by calling for the exoneration of The Groveland Four, which passed unanimously in the House and the Senate.



PROTECTING VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- **Equipping Others to Offer Help:** As a society, we have an obligation to offer help to those who are in distress. Often times simply letting a victim of abuse know that there is a way out is enough to help break a cycle of violence. Recognizing that many cosmetologists, barbers and other beauty specialists are often in a position where they can identify the symptoms of abuse, several other states have enacted legislation to guarantee that they are adequately trained to deal with such a situation. It is with that in mind that I proposed SB 1152, which would require that all beauty specialists undergo a 1-hour training program to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse, in order to qualify for licensure. Every step that we take to avoid abuse is a vital one, and because of that, I will continue to push for this important legislation.



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Protecting our Environment

• **Fracking Ban:** Every human being has a right to clean drinking water. Clean water is just as essential to life as the air that we breathe. Right now, however, there are corporations that want to put Floridians' access to clean water in jeopardy, in order to profit from the extraction of natural gas. Fracking is linked to numerous problems where it has been performed, from the contamination of drinking water to the causation of earthquakes. In Florida these problems have the potential to be even more harmful, due to our unique geological makeup. With that understanding, I have led the charge in the Senate to ban the practice of hydrologic-fracturing and acid fracking in Florida. I was the first Senator this year to

propose both a law banning fracking in Florida (SB 98) and a constitutional amendment to do so as well (SB 108). I also was the primary co-sponsor of a bipartisan bill to ban the practice of hydro-fracking (SB 442). While the bipartisan effort made it through one committee, it was not allowed a hearing in its next stop, largely because the House Republicans killed the companion bill. As with others, this is a fight that we will continue next session.



Marriage Equality

• **Updating Florida's Statutes:** While the United States Supreme Court recognized marriage equality as the law of the land in 2015, Florida's statutes still reflect the closed minded and repressive laws of the past. While couples in Florida are now free to marry whomever they love, there is still a law on the books designating marriage as only being between a man and a woman. This past session I introduced a bill (SB 1174) which would take that law off the books for good, and change any references in Florida's statutes of "husband and wife" to "spouses." This change is long overdue and one which I would like to see happen immediately.

REDUCING SMOKING IN FLORIDA

• **Cigarette Surcharge:** While we have long known the dangers that smoking poses to public health, there are still those who are trapped in the addictive grip of tobacco products. It has been proven that an increase in the price of tobacco products reduces the number of individuals who are inclined to purchase them. In an effort to reduce the number of Floridians who are negatively affected by the harms of smoking and to raise funds for additional cancer research, I introduced SB 988, which would add an additional dollar surcharge to the purchase of every pack of cigarettes in Florida. I believe that this would be a positive step towards reducing the number of Floridians who actively smoke cigarettes, while also providing more money for vital projects such as cancer research.

Upcoming Town Hall Meetings

- Monday June 19 6pm at Hallandale Beach Cultural Community Center
- Tuesday June 20 6pm at Hillsboro Community Center
- Thursday June 22 6pm at Pride Center