

For Immediate Release

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The Florida Senate Marks the Opening Day of the 2024 Legislative Session

President Passidomo's Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Tallahassee—Florida Senate President Kathleen Passidomo (R-Naples) today opened the Florida Senate for the 2024 Regular Session of the Florida Legislature. The President will hold a media availability at 2:00 p.m. this afternoon in the Senate Chamber.

Senator Darryl Rouson (D-St. Petersburg) led the Senate in prayer at the opening of today's sitting. Capitol Police officers Eric Cross and Timothy Rice, Sergeant James Grant, and Investigator Doug Stribling, coordinated by Lieutenant Wyland, presented the Colors. The National Anthem was played by students from the Florida State University College of Music, Horn Section, which included Jonah Zimmerman, Chris Bloom, Ben Dubbert, Madison Barton and Cory Kirby. The Doctor of the Day is Dr. Stephanie Haridopolos, former First Lady of the Florida Senate. Dr. Haridopolos specializes in family medicine and is the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors for Florida Healthy Kids Corporation.

President Passidomo's remarks, as prepared for delivery, following introductions of dignitaries, are below.

Senators and families, friends and visitors, Good Morning, Happy New Year, and Welcome Back.

Thank you to all our families and guests for being here today in spite of the weather. I think tropical storm force winds on Opening Day must be good luck – kind of like rain on your wedding day. It poured on our wedding day, and John and I have been married for almost 45 years. Rain has certainly been good luck for me. For all of us, I hope the old adage "In like a lion, out like a lamb," rings true this session.

As I finish out my term as President, it is particularly special to see our Senate families, having watched them grow and change over the years.

When my old seatmate Senator Powell and I came to the Senate in 2016, he was a single man. Then he met and married Whitney, and then Chandler came along. It has been so much fun to see her grow up.

It is amazing to think Leader Book was expecting when she was elected to the Senate. What a joy it has been to watch her twins, Hudson and Kennedy, grow up here.

Senator Hutson and Tanya have kept us guessing which "T" name they will use next after Taylor, Tyler, Turner, and Tucker.

And, they aren't the only ones – over the last few years, it seems that we have welcomed more and more children to the Senate family, which brings us so much joy.

We have watched the Pizzo twins grow into young men who are just as dapper as their father. Actually, more so. I look forward to seeing them later in session.

Senator Calatayud, we are so honored that your grandmother could join us today. Bienvenida!

Senators Baxley, Boyd, Broxson, Burton, Hooper, Stewart, Thompson, Harrell, Osgood, Torres and others are blessed with grandkids. Some days it's tough to keep up with all of them, and other days, we are hoping for more. I think Senator Broxson is currently leading the field.

President-Designate Albritton and Chair Mayfield are more recent additions to the grandparents club, which I know we all agree is absolutely the best.

In my own family, we had an exciting development last weekend. Due to the weather, John and Francesca couldn't make it up from Naples this morning, and Catarina couldn't get out of Oxford, Mississippi. However, we are excited to announce the engagement of our youngest daughter, Gabriella, who is here with me today. We just love her fiancé, Wilson Smith, and his family. Gabby, thank you for being here.

While the Senate family has many blessings to celebrate, we have also experienced some profound losses in recent weeks and months - Senator Gruters' mother, Senator Yarborough's father, Senator Avila's mother, Senator Burton's father, Senator Osgood's grandfather. And, my own father, last Fall.

We have our parents to thank for shaping us. Even those who are no longer with us have left an imprint on this chamber. We have our spouses to thank for their support. Because of their love, encouragement, and sacrifice, we have the opportunity to serve. We have our children and grandchildren to thank for keeping us grounded. Family reminds us of where we came from, where we are going, and what we are fighting for. As we begin this new session, it's our families who inspire us to work for a better future for all families throughout Florida. To always follow our "True North."

While we will spend a lot of time together this session, I know we will also continue to spend a lot of time with our constituents. Many citizens throughout Florida travel to Tallahassee during session to make their voices heard. They deserve our attention, and they receive it.

When developing legislation, I always advocate the "big tent approach." Everyone is invited to help develop, revise and improve legislation. Whether we hear from constituents in committee, in our district office or walking through the grocery store during a weekend at home, their feedback is very important.

As you know, my number one priority last Session was our Workforce Housing initiative – Live Local. Keeping that theme in mind, this Session the Senate incorporated the big tent approach to legislation in both the Live Healthy and Learn Local initiatives. Throughout last summer and fall, we met with people from all over the state to hear their thoughts and ideas, and I feel really good about our work products.

We know access to health care is important at every phase of life. Insurance – even Medicaid – does not guarantee access.

I want to be clear. I'm not going to spend the next 60 days re-litigating Medicaid expansion. I understand the arguments both for and against. We have had the debate several times over the last decade.

Medicaid expansion is not going to happen. It is not a quick fix. It is not a panacea. In fact, if you cannot actually schedule an appointment with a health care provider, Medicaid Expansion is nothing more than a false government promise.

If we do not take steps now to grow our health care workforce, all Floridians – even those with great insurance, and certainly those on Medicaid – will continue to face barriers to care.

My goal is to make sure our health care system is growing and innovating – to better serve all Floridians.

The robust package Senator Burton, Senator Harrell and I have been working on will expand Florida's health care workforce with new opportunities for education, training and retention. This includes enhancing partnerships between hospitals and colleges and universities that train health care workers, and residency slots and loan repayment options that drive providers to underserved areas.

We want to make sure our medical school graduates stay in Florida, and also attract more out-of-state residents to build their lives and medical practices here in our communities.

We are funding provider increases that incentivize health care workers to continue serving in needed fields like mental health, labor and delivery, and helping Floridians with disabilities. And, we are expanding clinical training to include more rural, remote, or other locations difficult to access.

We know hospital emergency rooms are the most expensive real estate in Florida. Live Healthy will help create partnerships with other primary care settings so care that is urgent, but not life threatening, can be handled in a more efficient and appropriate setting. Live Healthy also expands access to preventative health screenings to ensure early diagnosis and better management of chronic disease. That is a concept my Dad, an ophthalmologist, had advocated over the years.

I am a believer in the free market. I know the private sector can innovate in ways government could never imagine. What government can do is facilitate the exploration and implementation of new technologies.

The Live Healthy Innovation Council will examine solutions to improve the delivery and quality of health care in our state, and develop a loan program to support implementation, with a focus on underserved areas.

We will also consider legislation by Senator Collins to create a streamlined, yet sound, pathway for out-of-state providers moving to Florida. Senator Boyd has legislation to establish a new category of teaching hospitals, focused on behavioral health. Senator Brodeur is working on legislation to expand services to Floridians with disabilities. And, Senator Collins is also working on a priority of Speaker Renner to expand price transparency.

This is a robust package of bills. It is complex, but critically important. In order to care for our growing population and meet the increased demand for health care, we must expand our workforce, increase efficiencies and elevate quality. I look forward to continued feedback and suggestions from the entire Senate.

Tomorrow we will take up our public school deregulation package, Learn Local, by Senators Calatayud, Hutson, and Simon. I am so proud of this first-in-the-nation effort to cut the red tape

and reduce bureaucracy in our neighborhood public schools, while maintaining high academic standards and school safety.

For decades now, we have rejected the idea that neighborhoods and zip codes alone should govern how and where a child is educated. We created and implemented rigorous standards across every aspect of the public school system as a way to make certain every child has access to a great education, regardless of where they live.

As part of that effort, every year, more and more regulations are placed on our school districts, which leads to more paperwork, and more tasks in an already packed school day. Telling districts what to do and how to do it was supposed to ensure quality, but it can also stifle innovation.

With Learn Local we do not lose one inch of the accountability measures instituted over the last thirty years. These metrics and measurements provide information to help parents make the best decisions for their children. Parents are more involved than ever before. Parents are the ultimate arbiter of performance. Parents will hold neighborhood schools, charter schools, and private schools accountable with their voices and their feet.

With universal school choice now a reality for Florida families, reducing bureaucratic red tape will give neighborhood public schools that have served our communities and families for generations, a meaningful chance to compete right alongside other school choice options.

Finally, I am very proud of the work we have undertaken on our Wildlife Corridor, starting under President Simpson's leadership, we have made historic, once-in-a-generation investments that will preserve the natural beauty of our state, what makes our state so special, for future Floridians to enjoy. This year, we will take that commitment to the next level.

Senator Hutson is sponsoring legislation to use revenues available through the Gaming Compact that Governor DeSantis signed with the Seminole Tribe in 2021 to establish dedicated funding for continuing acquisition and management of our conservation lands.

We know conservation and preservation of Florida's land and water resources is essential to maintaining the quality of life enjoyed by Floridians, as well as sustaining and growing a thriving economy, including legacy industries like tourism and agriculture.

These investments preserve working farmland and ranchland, allow for strategic expansion of the Wildlife Corridor, and help protect endangered native species, including the Florida Panther.

Additional funding for land management will expand public access to state recreation lands, including Florida's state parks, greenways and trails, and game lands. It will also help protect against wildfire damage and infiltration of dangerous non-native species.

Using these new revenues to acquire and manage conservation lands and invest in our clean water infrastructure will be a phenomenal return on investment for our state. I hope the legislation will earn your support.

In closing, my gift for you this session is a mirror, which our Multimedia Staff has personalized for you. Just as our families keep us grounded, mirrors keep us honest.

Tallahassee is an easy place to find fair-weather, or as I call them, "temporary" friends, who compliment our looks and laugh at all of our jokes. When we look in the mirror, we see

ourselves for who we really are. We remember where we came from and what we are fighting for.

I hope the mirrors will be a beautiful, yet practical addition to your office or home. Thank you again, and I look forward to working with each of you this session.

To view the Senate's opening sitting in full, please visit www.TheFloridaChannel.org. To access photos from the sitting taken by the Senate's professional photographers, please visit <https://flsenate.photoshelter.com/>.

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

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