



FLORIDA AFL-CIO UNITED LABOR LOBBY



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

2007 FLORIDA LEGISLATURE

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Issue 1



Welcome back to the Florida AFL-CIO and United Labor Lobby's *Legislative Update*! This weekly publication will be produced during the whole of the 2007 Legislative Session. In it, we will follow various issues being monitored by the United Labor Lobby, keep you updated on our advocacy efforts and tell you how to get involved. We will make a concerted effort in this publication to give you more than just the facts...we will try to contextualize all the various legislative happenings in an effort to make you feel like you are right here with us, because in many ways...you are. You are the most important part of our legislative program. The Florida AFL-CIO has seen its influence grow in the Legislature over the past few years and we have been able to accomplish great things. Our responsibility is to stand up to the powerful groups who have more money and more institutionalized power, and to protect the interests of working people. The forces we often find ourselves opposing in Tallahassee certainly have the dollar power but we have the power that comes from thousands of members, like you, who have decided to become actively involved in the processes that make the laws that have such a

dramatic impact on the lives of you, your family and your community. An educated public is the first step towards an actively involved public...and that is the most powerful weapon in our arsenal. We hope that this publication will serve to keep you informed about what is going on in Tallahassee, but being informed is not enough. We have all heard the old adage that "knowledge is power." Well, that idea is half-right. Knowledge can be a powerful thing, but only if it is used to prompt action. The Florida AFL-CIO and ULL are constantly working to improve our tools that help you take action. To find out more about these tools, please email templin@flafcio.org or call Rich at (850) 224-6926.

Governor Charlie Crist's First State of the State Address: There's a New Sheriff in Town Part I

Each year we begin the legislative session with a closer look at the traditional "State of the State" address. Over the past eight years, this look generally took the form of an exercise in good old fashioned political debunking. Governor Jeb Bush excelled at weaving beautiful flights of fancy with his speeches, articulating his positions by building a carefully scripted ideological fantasy world, one where his dubious solutions to Florida's problems were perfect. Now there is a new Governor, one who seems hell bent on making history as a true bi-partisan problem solver. One who seems committed to breaking free of ideological purity in favor of common sense solutions to the challenges facing our state. It is far too early in his administration to make any judgments, but if his first few months in office are any indicator, Charlie Crist may prove to be a real governor for the people. His first State of the State address was surprising in its bi-partisan tone, its commitment to thinking beyond the narrow views of the past administration and his commitment to working with everyone. In the first two issues of the *Legislative Update* we look at the Governor's speech and offer our own take on his ideas.

"On my first day in office, just a little more than two months ago, I issued an executive order that holds my administration to higher standards of ethical conduct than ever before. That order also created the Office of Open Government for the purpose of replacing the door, and installing a window

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on the people's Government. And the sun shines through that window. I also ordered a top-to-bottom review of our customer service operations and the implementation of my Plain Language Initiative. Changes are under way to provide the people with the most ethical, open, and customer-friendly government possible. It is their government after all, and it should serve them well.

The principle of open government suffered greatly under former Governor Bush with more exceptions to the state's open records laws enacted than at any other time since the history of the Sunshine Act. Similarly, a quick glance through media records shows that his administration also suffered a great deal of ethical lapses. When Governor Crist was first elected, there was a great deal of controversy surrounding his inauguration. When it came to light that many of the festivities carried multi-million dollar price tags were picked up by some of Florida's biggest corporations leading many in the press to question his commitment to ethics in government. Crist cancelled many of these events and he has been trying to build his ethics credibility ever since. He has made the pledge to keep the government open and ethical, but it is still too soon to see whether or not he makes good on that pledge. We will know soon enough, there are currently 26 different bills seeking to create new exemptions from the state's public records laws.

"As oppressive as the spiraling costs of property insurance, are out-of control property taxes. Thousands of Floridians are trapped in their homes, or worse still, cannot afford a home at all. I have set forth a plan to reduce property taxes by doubling your homestead exemption, making the Save Our Homes protection portable and extending that protection to business and rental properties as well."

For the past few weeks, Tallahassee has been the all property taxes all the time channel. There can be no doubt that there is a problem, spiraling assessments have created problems for many Floridians and polls show that most currently approve of the changes outlined by the Governor during his speech. However, there is a serious risk that the current problem will be used as an excuse to enact some of the most radical tax changes in our state's history. Changes that could cost our counties millions in revenue and lead to major reductions in the services our people need. The Governor's ideas and those coming out of the Florida House are seriously regressive and while they will certainly benefit Florida's wealthy, they could be devastating for people of lower incomes. A recent study published by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) examined the budgets of all 67 counties and found no evidence of excess spending or inflated employee rosters. Taxes may be going up, but our counties are still working to keep up with increased costs for services. Property tax reform may be a good thing but we should all be vigilant to the real costs of many of the ideas coming out of Tallahassee.

"Just as affordable home ownership should be an American birthright, so should the promise of an excellent public education. Education is not just an obligation, it is a civil right—it is the equal opportunity provider, and it ensures that all of our children have an equal opportunity to participate in the American dream."

In spite of his rhetoric during the campaign, so far Charlie Crist has taken a radically different approach to education than his predecessor. Crist has been advocating for full implementation of the class size initiative, has shown a real commitment to increasing teachers' salaries with real dollars and has been working cooperatively with our teachers on performance pay proposals. His budget calls for \$300 million to increase teacher pay, \$3.8 billion for smaller class sizes and he has shown a willingness to reform the use of the FCAT. He has also pledged to increase university funding while freezing tuition rates for the first time in years. His speech did not mention increasing vouchers, the first time that idea has not been expressed in a State of the State speech in 9 years.

Next week in Part II we will examine Crist's speech on social services, the environment and economic development.

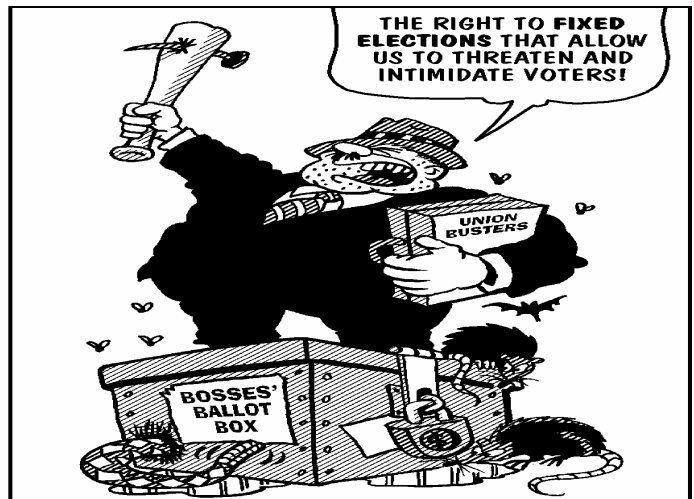
Attacking Citizen's Initiatives - Round 4



It's official - With the passage of last year's Constitutional Amendment requiring a 60% threshold for all future amendments, Florida's Constitution is now the hardest constitution to amend in the country where the opportunity for citizen's initiatives exist. That's not enough for the Florida Chamber of Commerce, Florida Retail Federation and the other inside power brokers who want to take away your right to direct democracy through citizen's initiatives. Over the past 3 years, these forces have introduced a broad range of proposed constitutional amendments designed to weaken the people's right to amend their constitution through the citizen's initiative including the new 60% threshold and the 2004 provision to decrease the time people have to fulfill the requirements of the signature gathering

process. Perhaps the greatest threat has been in form of statutory changes in the rules governing the petition gathering process. For 3 years now, the Florida Chamber of Commerce and their allies have been pushing legislation designed to get rid of the initiative process by imposing arbitrary new restrictions on the gathering of signatures, restrictions designed to create insurmountable obstacles for grass roots groups while keeping the option available to Florida's well funded power brokers like the Chamber. For three years we have been successful, beating back each attempt while each year the Chamber's demands get weaker and weaker.

They are back this year with a flurry of bills, each designed to have a chilling effect on the initiative process. Our first time at bat this year came on Thursday, March 8th when two petition process bills were heard in both the House and Senate. **SB 900** by **Senator Posey** was heard in the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee and several amendments were adopted making the legislation more palatable, but there are still several major problems. First, the legislation bans paying signature gatherers per signature either directly or indirectly. Paid signature gatherers are a necessity in a state as large and with as high a signature requirement as Florida. The minimum wage amendment, class size amendment and universal pre-K all used paid signature gatherers. Accountability measures like requiring a set number of signatures per day are an important component of successful campaigns and must be preserved. The bill also creates a problematic revocation process that allows groups to go behind supporters of an initiative and gather revocations of signed petitions making political shenanigans by special interest groups like the Chamber of Commerce an almost certainty. **HB 7009** was heard later in the day in the House Economic Expansion and Infrastructure Council with all of the above provisions and an additional component giving store owners like Publix the right to pick and choose who can gather signatures in on their quasi private/public property. Both bills passed. The Florida AFL-CIO and ULL are heavily invested in this issue and are working to defeat these measures. SB 900 will next be heard in the Senate Judiciary Committee where allies like Committee Chair Senator Alex Villalobos have pledged to help us defeat the measure. HB 7009 is next headed for the House floor. **Thanks to Senators Justice, Margolis, Rich and Representatives Bucher, Cusack and Reed for voting against the bills in their respective committee.**



Working Families Headed for a Major Victory on KidCare

For the past eight years, all elements of Florida's safety net have been in serious decline and nowhere is this more acute than in health care. In spite of being home to one of the wealthiest populations in the country, many of Florida's working families are still unable to provide health care for their families. The number of uninsured in Florida continues to rise. In 2006, **3.6 million people had no health insurance**, making Florida the 3rd worst state in the nation, coming in behind Texas and New Mexico. **Over 17% of all children (733,000)** in Florida have no health insurance, making Florida the 6th worst state in the country, and of the children with access to health care, over 1 million children currently receive their health coverage from Medicaid and other publicly funded programs. This is why the dramatic budget cuts and program reductions to KidCare, one of Florida's most important programs for children, have been particularly devastating. For years, health care sector unions and health care advocates have been pushing for improvements in the program but their efforts were met with scorn by the previous administration. Now, things are changing. Late last year, a broad coalition which now includes the Florida AFL-CIO prepared a comprehensive report detailing the changes needed to KidCare. In years past, this document would have been ignored. This year, it has been embraced by the Governor and the leadership in both the House and Senate and is being used to guide the policy making for a much needed overhaul of KidCare. The House bill is still being drafted and has yet to be assigned a number. In the Senate, KidCare improvements are contained in **SB 930 by Senator Dawson**. This important bill, named the "**Children's Health Act**" contains the following important provisions:

- The proposal increases eligibility to bring more children without health care into the system.
- The bill allows the children of state employees to be covered if eligible.
- The language closes a loophole that excluded many pregnant women from getting prenatal care
- The bill creates a more seamless system, combining separate programs
- Eliminates many of the insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles

The House version is expected to look very similar. If this issue survives the legislative process and is signed into law, it could wind up being the most important change of the 2007 session. We are monitoring this issue closely and will keep you informed.

