

Crist: 'The Future Is Now'

Gov. Charlie Crist's prepared remarks to the Florida Legislature, as released by the governor's office:

For the nearly 20 million people who choose to call Florida home, to not just raise their children and build their businesses, but to truly live out their dreams; the future is now.

The strength of our state and [national economies](#) are being tested in ways not seen in decades: unemployment is at a 16-year high. We are in a [national housing](#) crisis and foreclosures continue to rise; businesses are shutting their doors in the communities they have long served; and a weakened Wall Street has left us in a [credit crunch](#) that is cutting into hardworking families' [nest eggs](#) and college savings. Our people are struggling, as a state and as a nation. And like never before, we have an obligation to serve them well.

The state of our state may be challenged today, but my friends, the determination of our people is stronger than ever.

Because I believe that with every crisis comes opportunity. We gather here tonight with the tools and the resolve – the opportunity – to preserve investments in our students and teachers, the opportunity to preserve investments in the [safety and security](#) of our people, in the health and well-being of the most vulnerable among us – and the opportunity to preserve our investments in the very reasons government exists to serve.

Since I took office two years ago, we have cut state spending by \$7 billion, lowered property taxes by an estimated \$25 [billion over five years](#) and created innovative no-cost solutions like the Florida Discount Drug Card and Cover Florida. In fact, the [CATO institute](#) has recognized our state as the most fiscally responsible in the nation. And while we have taken these prudent steps, tough decisions lie ahead. We are going to have to work to make people our priority and to spend their money wisely while continuing to lessen their tax burden.

Ten days ago I sent to you a [budget recommendation](#) that addresses the people's priorities for our future. The \$66 billion plan includes more than \$10 billion for infrastructure improvements in transportation and economic development – including Central Florida's commuter rail; a \$21 billion investment in our students and teachers; more than \$2 billion to protect and preserve Florida's natural resources; nearly \$5 billion to keep our people and our neighborhoods safe – the most critical function of government; and more than \$25 billion to fund critical health care services for our citizens.

I am grateful for Florida's share of the federal stimulus bill. These funds will serve as a bridge to better economic times. This money will help us avoid tax increases and prevent deep cuts that would further burden Florida's families and businesses. The Federal Stimulus bill is not perfect; I've never seen a bill that is. But, this package will provide much needed tax relief, as well as immediate assistance in education, transportation, unemployment compensation, renewable energy and other aid and is expected to save or create as many as 206,000 jobs that the people of Florida desperately need. Of the more than \$12 billion our state will receive over three years our budget proposes using nearly \$5 billion next year.

Our administration looks forward to working with this Legislature, our cities and counties to begin implementing these dollars quickly and efficiently. I'm proud to announce that Don Winstead, a long-time public servant and deputy secretary of the Department of Children and Families, will serve as Special Advisor to the Governor for the Implementation of the American Recovery Act.

We must use every dollar available to us to adequately fund education, and I again call upon this Legislature to quickly approve the Compact between the state of Florida and the Seminole Tribe. Approval will release at least \$2.5 billion over 25 years to help educate our children. Approval of the Compact will preserve and create thousands of jobs for Floridians and will safeguard us against the expansion of gambling to every corner of our state. Failure to act will take the process out of our hands, and may lead to the loss of all revenues. Whether you are for or against gaming, the Compact makes sense and deserves your support.

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There is no doubt, that for our economy to recover, we must get people back to work. In the past several weeks I have visited with Floridians at seven unemployment offices across our state. I have looked into their eyes and I saw worry. I saw good, honest people who desperately want the opportunity to help themselves. Some argue the politics of the federal stimulus plan. My friends, while our people worry, we cannot put politics over their needs – the needs of our students and teachers, the sick and the infirm, or those out of work. We should not ask what it means to be Republican nor should we ask what it means to be Democrat; but rather what a good human being is supposed to do. In each and every one of us is the hope of the millions who sent us here. We must honor that sacred trust, to put them first.

To help our workforce adapt to a changing economy, I recommend \$2 billion in workforce investments. These initiatives include over \$800 million for career education and employment services that will retain 3,000 jobs. They also include the School Readiness program, which helps preschoolers develop the skills they need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond – and helps parents maintain employment and achieve financial independence. An investment of \$621 million in getting the

next generation off to a good academic start will retain more than 12,800 jobs for child-care providers and allow families to remain in the workforce. \$6.6 million for Ready to Work will ensure job-seekers of all ages have the skills needed for most jobs today, giving them an edge with employers –in Florida, and nationwide.

Employers like Shands Jacksonville and Lockheed Martin rely on Ready to Work because it ensures high-quality applicants. They have reduced turnover among new employees, as well as their hiring and training costs; and are giving long-time employees the opportunity to learn more – and earn more.

Perhaps, the ingenuity of Floridians is no better represented than in the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of our state's business community. Small business owners, in particular, are embracing the challenges of the economy, driven by a hope for prosperity. They are inspired by a vision of a better way of life for their families and their employees.

We must reward – not penalize or stifle – innovation and productivity in our business community. As we pursue our efforts in this Legislative Session, let us remember that the circle of prosperity in the Sunshine State begins with business.

To this end, our Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, working with its public/private partnerships, helps jump-start high-potential business sectors throughout our state. As a result, Florida's sports industry has grown to a \$36-billion-a-year business sector – film and entertainment, nearly \$18-billion-a-year – and international trade, \$130 billion in 2008 alone. More than 550 aerospace companies call Florida home, securing the Sunshine State's place as a leader in space. With more than 600 biotech pharmaceutical and medical companies and a foundation of nearly 40,000 healthcare facilities, Florida's life sciences cluster continues to gain critical mass.

Our goal is to create a business environment where productivity and growth flourish – and to create quality, high-paying jobs. My recommendation for the Quick Action Closing Fund invests \$45 million to attract and retain industries, aimed at providing more than 17,000 high-wage jobs.

We look ahead to strengthen our economic development efforts and embrace the success of companies who already call Florida home. While we seek a return to the enduring principles of smart lending to restore the flow of capital and credit into our business communities, we must lift from our shoulders fear and pessimism and take up the mantle of persistence and determination to make the coming year better than the last. And we must do so with the realization that our actions today affect every future generation.

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So, for our precious children, the future is now.

We must build on the foundation of accountability laid by my predecessor that has taken Florida's schools from 31st in the nation in 2007 to 10th in the nation today. More of our students are graduating than ever before, with our African-American and Hispanic students showing some of the greatest gains. I urge you to pass legislation requiring school districts to spend 70 percent of their budgets in the classroom for our students and teachers, and to instill transparency by requiring school districts to provide dollar-by-dollar details online. Floridians deserve to know how their hard-earned dollars are being spent, and parents have a right to demand accountability. And I ask you to consider, as I have proposed, increasing per-student funding – Florida's children deserve it.

We must also renew our commitment to higher education. The strength of Florida's economy is dependent upon a workforce able to compete in an increasingly global economy. Our 28 community colleges are already recognized as the number one in the U.S. and I am committed to giving our universities the resources they need to be among the best in the nation. I am as committed as ever to keeping our schools affordable, but we must also enable them to achieve excellence.

These reforms cannot wait. The doctors, nurses, entrepreneurs and engineers of tomorrow are sitting in our grade school classrooms, and walking our college campuses right now. For them, the future is now.

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And for Florida's beautiful environment, the future is now.

From sugar-sand beaches and coral reefs, to crystal clear springs and rivers among lush forests, all with glorious sunrises and amazing sunsets. We must take action in our lifetime to protect these treasures, or future generations will not experience the Florida we know and love.

Now more than ever, we have before us a historic opportunity to save America's Everglades so that students and teachers can learn from this living classroom – a place known throughout the world as a true wonder, a mosaic of freshwater ponds, prairies and forested uplands.

We have taken the first steps toward what promises to be a historic move to save our Everglades. This move is as significant as the creation of the Everglades National Park itself. By acquiring nearly 300 square miles, we can reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Park; allowing us to clean, move and store water and protect the coastal estuaries. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity before us now.

This administration is committed to a diverse energy supply that balances solar,

wind and nuclear. Last year's energy bill was made possible by the strong support of our departed friend Representative Stan Mayfield. Stan's vision for Florida continues. Thank you, Representative Debbie Mayfield for your courage and leadership in seeing Stan's vision. We have a chance to diversify our energy supply and I urge the members in this chamber to pass this important legislation.

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We must remember that the strength of our state is not in the might of our laws or the power of our bully pulpits, but in our ability to protect the hopes and dreams of the very people we serve.

The future is now, my friends, and if we endeavor to strengthen and diversify our economy by capitalizing on the opportunities before us; if we seek to preserve God's majestic creation for generations to come; if we believe today's students can flourish as tomorrow's leaders, and if we hope to preserve the promise of the future for all Floridians – then we must come together as never before.

We must commit to one another and to each and every Floridian that we will work toward more than just the perception of bipartisanship, but strive to seek honest-to-goodness cooperation. There will be disagreements and differences of opinion, and that is the mark of a healthy democracy. But we have to be willing to put solutions above who gets the credit, and results above individual gain. People are counting on us, and for those of you who wish to keep score, I ask you to mark your wins and losses not for our parties, but for the people we serve.

Each of us in this chamber tonight remembers the moment we first decided to run for office, to aspire to be public servants. We are going to have to dig, and I mean really dig deep, for the hope and the optimism and the determination that inspired you to put your name on a ballot and declare to the people of this state, you deserve their vote!" They sent us here through a sacred trust and we'd better fight to earn every bit of it over the next 60 days, because the future is now and the people we serve are counting on us to work – not for the next election – but for them and for Florida's next generation.

May God bless you and may he continue to bless our beautiful Florida.