

## 2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

SESSION WEEK 7: WEEK OF APRIL 14

### HOPE FLORIDA

In what seems a weekly entry out of the [Shondaland](#) tv drama factory, the House Health Care Budget Subcommittee, has become must see tv for those in the process. This week was no different. On Tuesday, Joshua Hay, Chair of the Hope Florida Foundation, testified under oath before the Health Care Budget Subcommittee. He acknowledged that mistakes were made, and the Foundation was not as fiscally responsible as it should have been. Chair of the subcommittee, Republican Alex Andrade, and many other members raised numerous concerns related to Hope Florida's financial activity and transparency. Chair Andrade said he intends to subpoena DeSantis' former Chief of Staff, and current Attorney General, James Uthmeier. Andrade has said Uthmeier personally directed 501(c)(4) groups to requests millions of dollars' worth of grants from Hope Florida. Andrade would not only like to subpoena Uthmeier, but also Hope Florida's attorney, Jeff Aaron, and Florida Chamber's CEO Mark Wilson for their involvement. Jeff Aaron has stated he would be willing to testify without a subpoena, while Uthmeier has not yet responded.

In the aftermath of yet another revelation-rich hearing, Eric Dellenback, Hope Florida Foundation Executive Director who also participated in the hearing, has submitted his resignation, but will remain Chair of the Florida Faith and Community Advisory Council. Although he claims new opportunities as the reason for his resignation, many speculate it is because of the concerns over the Hope Florida scandals being discovered in the House Health Care Budget Subcommittee. In 2024, there was a \$67 million Medicaid settlement, \$10 million of which went to Hope Florida. Though the funds were supposed to be utilized to connect people with community resources to reduce public welfare, it appears almost all went toward political committees aiming to support the Governor's priorities related to opposing recreational marijuana.

Due to the controversies surrounding Hope Florida, the Legislature has been taking a much harder look at the DeSantis administration. Speaker Daniel Perez instructed House Budget Chair McClure to open a broad investigation into the state's spending under the DeSantis administration. With responses due by May 16<sup>th</sup>, McClure issued requests to six state agencies: Agency for Health Care Administration, Department of Corrections, Department of Education, Division of Emergency Management, Department of Management Services, and the Florida State Guard. Many Republican leaders, specifically Speaker Perez, have called out the lack of accountability from the executive branch's side with no answers being provided. More on this situation and Hope Florida to come as the House scheduled another Health Care Budget Subcommittee for next week on Thursday, April 24.

### BUDGET

Senate President Ben Albritton has proposed multiple sales tax holidays to help ease the financial stress that Florida families face throughout the year. He has suggested five tax holidays that primarily seek to help families, students, workers, and those preparing for hurricane season. The holidays, which seek to avoid overlapping other tax holidays, were filed as a part of the Senate's tax relief package, Senate Bill [7034](#). The hurricane preparedness holiday would last from June 2-15 and would exempt items, such as radios under \$50, generators up to \$3,000, tarps, and tie-down kits under \$100, from the 6% sales tax. The month of July would then be branded "Freedom Month," waiving sales tax on state park passes, fitness memberships, summer gear like camping equipment, and more. The holiday in August would be a Back-To-School tax break and would

remove taxes on backpacks under \$100, learning aids under \$30, school supplies under \$50, and more. The Skilled Worker Tax Holiday would provide exemptions for many power tools, hand tools, and other plumbing, safety, and electrical equipment and would last from August 29 to September 7. There would also be a Hunting Season Tax Holiday, which would provide tax breaks on firearms, ammunition, crossbows, bows, and related gear and take place from September 15 to October 19. In addition to these holidays, there is a permanent sales tax exemption on most clothing apparel and shoe up to \$75 in President Albritton's proposal.

Overall, the proposal would reduce the state's budget by \$1.83 billion next fiscal year. This proposal is much different than House Speaker Daniel Perez's plan to lower the state's overall sales tax, along with other taxes on commercial leases, electricity, and more. The House's tax package (HB 7031) would reduce the overall state sales tax rate from 6% to 5.25%, the commercial lease tax from 2% to 1.25%, the sales tax on electricity from 4.35% to 3.6%, along with other tax reductions. The House's proposal would reduce Florida's revenue by almost \$4.9 billion and local government's revenue by around \$540 million for the upcoming fiscal year. House Bill [7031](#) has passed the entire House and is waiting for a hearing in the Senate's Appropriations Committee. Despite the differences, President Albritton and other lawmakers seem confident that the chambers will be able to reach a compromise before the end of the legislative session.

## **CURRENT STANCE**

Currently, it looks like lawmakers will have a small window to align both the Senate and House budgets if they would like to finish session on time. In past years, it has taken the chambers around three weeks to a month to reach the final budget passage from when they passed their specific chamber budgets. Just over one week has elapsed since the original passing of the budgets in both chambers, leaving legislators less time to reach an agreement for a finalized budget. In past years, surplus funds have allowed lawmakers to have a smoother process in reaching a finalized budget. This provides some hope that lawmakers will be able to hammer out a budget that appeases both chambers with the time left in the remaining session.

## **TAXES & GOVERNMENT**

### **SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY**

On Wednesday, a provision (HB [301](#)) passed the full House, in a 103-11 vote, that would increase the maximum limit for how much a person could sue the government for. Sponsored by Republican Representative Fiona McFarland, this measure would increase the upper limit on the recovery amount to \$500,000 from \$200,000 per person and to \$1 million from \$300,000 for each incident. These sovereign caps were last amended in 2010 but were originally created by the Legislature in the early 1970s. HB 301 would also allow local governments to settle specific claims beyond the legal limit without the Legislature's approval, thus eliminating the needs for claims bills in those cases. The Florida Judicial Association and other supporters assert that the bill modernizes the current, obsolete system that delays and/or denies just compensation to those that are harmed due to government negligence. Opponents of the bill, which includes local governments and school districts, argue that the bill might result in greater financial burden on the local governments and thus create higher tax rates. The Senate companion bill (SB [1570](#)) sponsored by Republican Senator Nick DiCeglie has not been heard in any of its committees yet.

### **ORANGE COUNTY AND TDT**

Recently, the Senate's broad tax package bill (SB [7034](#)) has taken one of Democrat Senator Carlos Guillermo Smith's bills into its fold. Senator Smith's bill (SB [1114](#)) would loosen restrictions on Orange County's hotel tax spending by allowing counties to redirect funds from the tourist development tax, or TDT revenue. The TDT is a 6% surcharge in hotels on short-term stays.

Currently, counties are required to allocate 40% of TDT revenue to tourism marketing before being allowed to spend the funds in other areas. The new law would allow counties to spend \$50 million annually on advertising, with the rest of their TDT revenue being allowed to be spent elsewhere, such as public transportation. There are at least three counties affected by this change, with Orange County being the biggest, which collected \$364 million in TDT revenue in 2024. Senator Smith believes his provision would give power to Orange County to use TDT revenue to improve the county's public services and reduce wasteful government spending, while simultaneously allowing the county to reach its maximum tourism potential. Many in the tourism industry believe the more effective use of TDT revenue is to focus on marketing the region.

## **ELECTIONS**

### **SPECIAL ELECTIONS**

Governor Ron DeSantis has announced the special primary election for Florida House District 40 will occur on June 24<sup>th</sup>. The winner will then move on to special general election which will take place on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. This election is to fill current State Representative LaVon Bracy Davis' seat who is battling her brother for the State Senate seat. The deadline to register to vote is May 27<sup>th</sup> for the primary, and August 4<sup>th</sup> for the general election. All dates do coincide with the special election for Senate District 15 seat as well.

## **EDUCATION**

### **PRESIDENTIAL SEARCHES**

Yet another time this session, the Legislature has effectively acted against Governor Ron DeSantis' plans for Florida's future. On Wednesday, the full House passed House Bill [1321](#) in a 104-8 vote, which overhauls how university and college presidents are selected. The measure, sponsored by Republican Representative Michelle Salzman, has two main provisions. First, it would decrease the influence the Governor has over the schools' presidential searches; second, it would eliminate public record exclusions for college and university president applicants. It does this by banning state and local university officials from discussing presidential vacancies or possible future vacancies with the governor or a member of their administration. The measure would also give more power over university leadership to local school leaders by removing the requirement that the State University System's Board of Governors confirm presidential hires. Instead, each university board would be granted the ability to select and confirm a president of its choosing. With this bill, Representative Salzman seeks to increase transparency in the presidential search and hiring process along with financial accountability for board members. The Senate companion (SB [1726](#)) is set to be heard Monday in the Rules Committee.

Governor DeSantis' reaction to the bill has been hostile and he indicated recently that any legislation that takes the Governor's office out of institution's presidential selection process would be vetoed by him if it reaches his office. Governor DeSantis believes that a bill doing so would impede his higher education agenda; yet, Representative Salzman said the bill will not limit the Governor's power in any form. Another concerned voice, Republican Representative Mike Caruso, stated that presidential candidates could face consequences just for applying for the position at a university if their information becomes public information.

### **CELL PHONE BAN**

House Bill [949](#) unanimously passed the House Chamber on Wednesday. The bill would prohibit the use of cellphones in school districts throughout the entire state. Sponsored by Republican Representative Demi Busatta, this measure would remove language that allows teachers to create areas where students can use phones during instructional time, but allows for exceptions for

students who have a 504 plan, an IEP, or a doctor's note. The bill would also require that district school boards create regulations that designate where students are allowed to use devices under the supervision of administrators. While HB 949 is heading to the Senate Rules Committee, its Senate companion, SB [1296](#), sponsored by Republican Senator Danny Burgess, has only passed through one of its three required committees so far, raising concerns over its passage.

## **TEACHERS WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS**

On Wednesday, the Senate passed a measure (SB [1374](#)) in a 36-0 vote, which would require district school boards to create policies that would temporarily remove instructional personnel from their classrooms within 24 hours after an arrest notification for certain serious crimes. The bill, sponsored by Republican Senator Clay Yarborough, would also require teachers and administrators to self-report arrests or judgments for an increased range of crimes while allowing school districts to maintain confidentiality when necessary. A similar counterpart (HB [1287](#)) sponsored by Republican Representative William Robinson, will soon be considered on the House Floor.

## **DOGE TAKES ON UNIVERSITIES**

At the demand of the Executive Office of the Governor's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Florida's public universities now must hand over research funding for six years. College and university presidents were then informed by letter that they also must provide record of each institution's contracts, grants, applications, award amounts, and the progress made with closing diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) programs and activities. Representatives of the Board of Governors and the Florida Department of Education along with the Governor's DOGE team shall conduct site visits to guarantee compliance. These institutions must provide records of applications for grants awarded, grant-funded employees personnel details, and supply all research that has been published by the institutions' staff over the past six years along with the author's name, title, and position. There are more specific records required for each grant-funded research due by April 30<sup>th</sup>, which includes all funding sources, the purpose, and additional personnel records of the projects. Governor Ron DeSantis established the Florida DOGE office by an executive order on February 24 and was authorized to identify, investigate, and eliminate any unnecessary spending in local governments and the state's college and university systems.

## **DESANTIS' APPOINTMENT – DR. JOEL RUDMAN, VOTED DOWN**

On Tuesday, the Senate Higher Education Appropriations Committee showed strong opposition to former Republican Representative Joel Rudman during his confirmation hearing. Rudman was rejected by the committee in his appointment to the Pensacola State College Board of Trustees, which does not bode well for his upcoming confirmation hearing in the Senate Ethics and Elections Committee on Tuesday (April 22). This will be Rudman's last chance to be confirmed to the position. This opposition comes after Rudman made comments on the X app that committee members did not take lightly. Rudman's comments included, "We need to drug test our legislators read between the lines. I won't name any names. I know where the bodies are buried, but if they come after me in this confirmation hearing on Tuesday, maybe we can do another [live conversation on X], and I can give you some names." Republican Senator Tom Leek said that this move by Rudman was meant to intimidate and influence the legislators on the committee in his favor. If appointed to the Board of Trustees, Rudman's term would end on May 31, 2027.

## **FIRST RESPONDERS & PUBLIC SAFETY**

### **GAGE'S LAW**

This week, the Legislature approved an act (HB [1195](#)) named "Gage's Law" that would require hospitals to test for fentanyl in cases of suspected drug overdoses and poisonings. Sponsored by

Representatives Rita Harris and Doug Bankson, this bipartisan measure looks to improve patient outcomes and save lives through corrective action and the treatment of fentanyl exposures. This measure stems from Gage Taylor who died of an overdose in 2022; his family was present as the bill passed unanimously out of both Chambers. It has now been sent to the Governor for approval.

## **MINORS' ACCESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA**

Sponsored by Republican Senator Blaise Ingoglia, SB [868](#) seeks to create stricter regulations on minors' access to social media. Under this legislation, social media companies would be required to provide law enforcement with tools to decrypt encrypted messages. During the committee, numerous people, including social media companies and concerned citizens, expressed their concerns related to privacy, security, and government overreach. Moreover, it was highlighted that a government-mandated "backdoor" could lead hackers, or other individuals, to gain access to information and misuse it. Other implications of the bill include the prohibition of minors creating new accounts on platforms such as Snapchat as well. The Senate version will now head to the floor, while the House version (HB [743](#)), sponsored by Republican Representatives Michelle Salzman and Tyler Sirois, still has one committee stop left.

## **BROOKE'S LAW**

Sponsored by Republican Representative Wyman Duggan, HB [1161](#) – known as Brooke's law – aims to prevent the spread of non-consensual altered sexual images online. This legislation stems from Brooke Curry, who was victimized by a deepfake nude image. Following a game of pickleball, Brooke checked her phone to find numerous messages from people alerting her of a nude image of herself posted to social media platforms where she was directly tagged. The offender had taken a picture posted by Brooke to her Instagram and altered it to make it appear as a nude. She had never talked, met, or encountered the individual who spread the image online where countless people had access to it. Brooke noted that it was put on multiple platforms, and she had no option to go to the platforms for it to be taken down. This legislation would require online platforms to create and prominently display content removal policies for such material by the end of the year. The Senate version, [SB 1400](#) sponsored by Senator Alexis Calatayud, has passed all committees and is awaiting floor consideration.

## **2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

### **SCHEDULE**

The 2025 regular session dates can be found [here](#) and the annual calendar of major events can be found [here](#).

### **SESSION**

#### *Week 8*

- House Authorized Schedule for April 21-25, 2025, can be found [here](#).
- Senate Weekly Schedule for April 21-25, can be found [here](#).

#### *Week 9*

- House Authorized Schedule for April 28-May 2, can be found [here](#).
- Senate Weekly Schedule for April 28-May 2, can be found [here](#).

### **REGULAR SESSION BILL STATISTICS**

- *HOUSE*: 857 general bills filed; 93 have passed the House; 14 passed both Chambers.
- *SENATE*: 908 general bills filed; 115 have passed the Senate; 4 passed both Chambers.