

# The Miami Herald

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## State Legislature: Off and running

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*STARTING TUESDAY: The Florida Legislature begins its session on March 3. FILE ART*

It's that time of year again — the members of the Florida Legislature are about to take their seats in Tallahassee and conduct the state's business. And to be clear, it's none of the state's business where its transgender residents want to go to the bathroom, one of the sillier, intrusive and time-wasting initiatives on tap. Plus, it seeks to criminalize people in gender transition. Lawmakers should dispose of that one — quickly. There are serious issues with which they must responsibly contend. Here are just a few:

### ENTERPRISE ZONES

Lawmakers from across the state should reject bringing the enterprise-zone program to an abrupt and unnecessary end. Tweak it? Perhaps.

Its mission is to bring jobs creation and capital investment to distressed and underutilized neighborhoods by offering incentives to businesses that locate in such areas. While a state report says that enterprise zones have had mixed results in other parts of Florida, they have been an unqualified success in Greater Miami.

The once-rundown and fallow area on south Miami Beach — now fetchingly called SOBE — owes its global appeal and vitality to being in an enterprise zone. In the city of Miami, Wynwood, once a bustling factory district that fell on hard times as businesses moved offshore, then evolved into a funky arts district, is thumping with new life — and economic buzz — because of enterprise zones. The program encourages businesses to take a bit of a risk in exchange for tax credits for employees hired or on wages paid. These are performance-based incentives.

South Beach, its success aside, remains an enterprise zone, and that rankles some state lawmakers. Sure, it's time for a debate on how to modify the program, perhaps basing continued inclusion of successful turnarounds on a graduated scale. But ending the program? No, clearly its opponents should see for themselves the good that enterprise zones have done.

## GAMBLING:

In recent years, long-standing Florida taboos have fallen, with voters, courts and state lawmakers opening the door to gay marriage and limited use of medical marijuana.

Will more gambling be next?

Gambling will be a big issue this session. The state is renegotiating its 5-year-old pact with the Seminole Indians. And because of that, everything is on the table: new terms for parimutuel racetracks and frontons, blackjack and other dealer card games and resort casinos, like that proposed by Genting at the Miami Herald's former 14-acre bayside headquarters.

The way it stands, the Seminoles have paid the state a minimum of \$1 billion over five years to have table games at most of their casinos.

By rejecting that and reducing the games offered by the tribe, legislators could do something they have failed to do: revise the state's outdated gambling laws and allow new options for the tribe's competitors.

Is it time to expand casinos in Florida? Powerful groups like the Florida Chamber of Commerce and Sheriff's Association, oppose it. Right now, there are too many balls up in the air to decide. Legislators will have to come up with a plan that puts the state's well-being first.

## MEDICAL MARIJUANA:

In November, medical marijuana failed to get the required support of 60 percent of voters for a constitutional amendment, but the number of Floridians who voted in support sent a pretty clear message to the Legislature. Key lawmakers say they think Floridians want more than just the Charlotte's Web type of medical marijuana, which is high in cannabidiol, or CBD, but low in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the compound that produces a high.

They have indicated they are willing to tackle the issue this session. The Miami Herald grudgingly supported this measure in November, and we encourage legislators to come up with a solution that closes the access loopholes, among other elements that were too vague and loopy.

## SALE OF LIQUOR:

Would you like a drink to go along with your medical pot and your blackjack? A bill that would allow hard liquor to be sold at groceries and drug stores.

Currently, these venues are allowed to sell liquor, but only if the liquor section has a separate entrance

How would this work? A craft beer bill, House Bill 107, would allow state breweries to sell directly to customers. It would also officially legalize tap rooms and would allow breweries to sell 62-ounce "growlers." But the language of the law would also allow stores such as Walgreens, Publix, Target and Walmart to sell liquor within their stores.

## SCHOOL TESTING

After years of dealing with the dreaded FCAT, state lawmakers are finally listening to teachers, parents and administrators, realizing that we might be overtesting students. Gov. Rick Scott even did away with one 11th-grade test recently. And legislators are following his lead, meaning more tests should die.

This is definitely the right direction. Teachers, parents and students have become overwhelmed by the number of tests.

## HEALTHCARE:

Some 1.6 million Floridians signed up for coverage under the Affordable Care Act, more than in any other state. That should tell lawmakers that their decision to reject expanded Medicaid funding from the federal government is out of sync with residents of the Sunshine State.

Expanded Medicaid would widen coverage to include up to 1 million more Floridians. The acceptance of the program by prominent conservatives like Republican Govs. Jan Brewer in Arizona, Mike Pence in Indiana and John Kasich in Ohio makes Florida's refusal to go along increasingly hard to justify. Legislators have to make tough decisions every session, but this one's a no-brainer. Bring our tax dollars home instead of sending them to other states to fund their health coverage.

## CORRECTIONS:

DOC has a history of understaffing and underfunding. The current scandal, involving chronic mistreatment of inmates — leading to their deaths in the worst cases — is a direct result of the state's indifference. A proposal establishing an independent commission to oversee the troubled department has already made it out of committee. It's a good first step toward reform. Gov. Scott should help the bill win approval before the U.S. Department of Justice gets involved.

## EVERGLADES:

HB 7003 to overhaul the state's water-management system has already won bipartisan approval from a legislative committee. It contains some good ideas, like expanding a plan to assist landowners around the Everglades reduce agricultural runoff polluting Lake Okeechobee. But it fails to provide for the purchase of thousands of acres from U.S. Sugar south of the lake.

That land could be used as a reservoir to store water to filter out pollutants from Lake O's runoff. Without an escape valve to the south, repeated discharges to the east and west will continue to pollute Florida estuaries, rivers and coastal areas on the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. We urge state leaders to go big and opt for purchasing the land before an option to buy it expires in the fall.

## **DEDICATED REVENUE**

**We've said it before, we'll say it again: Don't divert trust-fund revenue and that generated by other sources from the purpose for which they are meant. That means don't raid the Sadowski housing trust fund, which creates affordable housing throughout the state. Trust-fund money rehabilitates inhabitable vacant homes, provides help with down payments and closing costs and renovates apartments for seniors and people with disabilities. Since 2003, however, lawmakers have pick-pocketed almost \$2 billion from Sadowski, adding the funds to general revenue. Affordable housing equals stronger families and more stable neighborhoods, plus the jobs created to make homes and apartments habitable. So hands off the Sadowski funds. Ditto Amendment 1 money to be used to purchase and preserve environmentally fragile land.**