

Editorial: A guide to a successful 2018 legislative session

Editorial Board, Naples Daily News



The Florida Legislature's 2018 session begins Tuesday with a warehouse of bills from which to choose and an \$87.4 billion budget proposed by Gov. Rick Scott to refine.

The 60-day session starts early this year because 2018 is an election year for the 120 House seats and half of the state's 40 senators. Lawmakers must separate legislative work from electioneering.

Here is a recap of some issues the Naples Daily News editorial board has addressed:

- **Senate Bill 874 by state Sen. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, and its companion House Bill 191 provide one of the most important measures the Legislature can pass. The bipartisan bill would stop the legislative raids of trust funds that were created in 1992 to address Florida's affordable housing needs. The 1992 act set aside a portion of documentary stamp taxes on real estate transactions to distribute back to counties and cities for programs like down payment assistance, housing rehabilitation and to build apartment complexes. The Legislature has drifted from the mission over the years, reallocating much of the trust fund money to budget balancing.**

- In addition to producing a balanced budget by its scheduled March 9 adjournment, Floridians should insist lawmakers deliver a plan for better hurricane preparation and response. These measures would include backup power for nursing homes and adult living centers; a fuel reserve and emergency distribution system; shelter/housing support, and regulating debris removal companies.

- Repealing HB 7069 approved last year and starting over by individually vetting the 50 or so different educational measures crammed into one overbroad bill in the 2017 session's final hours.

- A continued financial commitment toward Everglades restoration projects and an increased commitment to acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands and beach restoration. SB 370 that would dedicate \$100 million yearly to the state's Florida Forever land acquisition trust fund so far has received favorable committee votes.

- A greater investment in both mental health programs and education. Scott's budget calls for a 3.7 percent spending increase for schools. Florida still ranks in the lower tier among states in per-student spending and per-capita mental health funding.

- Further addressing the state's opioid crisis, such as SB 8 by state Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Fort Myers, that regulates prescription writing and Passidomo's SB 434 to create a pilot project focusing on withdrawal symptoms for newborns through an alternative, less-costly treatment program.

- Previously, we've urged lawmakers to unravel the confusion for local governments created by the 2017 law guiding where medical marijuana dispensaries are allowed. Many cities and counties have adopted moratoriums on dispensaries while they sort this out. Now, however, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions' memo Thursday that removes protections for states that have laws for selling marijuana creates even greater uncertainty for Florida.

- Fracking ban SB 462 and SB 834, offering separate approaches to end advanced oil-well stimulation techniques and hydraulic fracturing, haven't received committee votes yet but have backing in each major party. Our editorial board's position for 2018 remains what it's been the past two years. We advocate a moratorium on

such techniques that's accompanied by an appropriation for a Florida-specific geological and hydrological study. In our view, the science would be needed to support any such ban if ultimately enacted because it's certain to be legally challenged by the industry.

- HB 33 would allow a law officer to pull over and ticket a driver just for texting behind the wheel. Currently, a driver has to commit some other infraction for an officer to stop the vehicle and ticket a texting-while-driving offense. Almost all other states ban texting while driving.