

Editorial: As Florida legislators prepare to convene for their 2018 session, here are 10 of our policy priorities for them

By **Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board**

JANUARY 5, 2018, 6:50 PM

Florida legislators will convene for their annual 60-day session against the backdrop of a pivotal election year. But politics are not a good excuse for senators and representatives to avoid the hard choices they must make to tackle the state's biggest challenges. Here are 10 areas where we're urging legislators to act — or in one case, hold the line against further incursions.

Hurricane preparation: Irma's rampage up the Florida Peninsula in September laid bare the imperative for the state to be better prepared for the next big storm. Legislators have discussed some smart responses, including: Require nursing homes to install generators to maintain air conditioning and avert more tragedies like the deaths of a dozen residents in a sweltering South Florida facility; establish regional gasoline reserves to prevent shortages; streamline evacuation procedures; and speed up power restoration. Now it's time to turn talk into action, before the next hurricane season. Our economy — and many lives — could depend on it.

Puerto Rico diaspora: Almost 300,000 Puerto Ricans have come to Florida since Hurricane Maria hammered the island, with many arriving in Metro Orlando. Gov. Rick Scott has overseen a comprehensive state response to match them with benefits and services. But it's crucial for legislators, who draft and pass the final budget, to make sure the dollars are there to cover the additional demand on programs. Central Florida school districts, for example, are spending millions more to educate thousands of students they didn't plan for, but they won't get the extra money to cover this year's cost unless legislators include it in the budget.

Affordable housing: *The arrival of so many Puerto Ricans also threatens to exacerbate Central Florida's acute shortage of affordable housing. Many storm evacuees are living temporarily with family or friends, but will be looking for places of their own if they relocate here permanently. Florida law dedicates a portion of a state tax on real-estate transactions to expand affordable housing. This is good policy, not just to meet an important public need, but also to create jobs and boost the economy. Yet legislators have routinely raided these dollars over the past decade to fill other holes in the budget. To do so after Maria would be unconscionable.*

Environmental protection: Legislators also have played games with money earmarked for land and water conservation under a constitutional amendment voters approved in 2014, diverting hundreds of millions of dollars to routine agency expenses. The Senate's new budget chairman, Republican Rob Bradley, is calling for spending \$100 million a year on the state's main land-buying program, raising annual spending on springs restoration to \$75 million, and putting another \$50 million a year into protecting the St. Johns River. These commitments would give legislators less flexibility in budgeting, but would reflect the will of voters.

Texting while driving: Legislators banned this reckless practice in 2013, but the state law is too weak. It designates texting while driving as a secondary offense, so police can't stop a driver they catch in the act unless he's also committed a primary offense, such as speeding. Meanwhile, accidents due to distracted driving across Florida are soaring, causing thousands of injuries and hundreds of deaths a year. This is the year Florida needs to join the 40 other states that consider texting while driving a primary offense. Even legislators usually allergic to more government regulation, like Speaker Richard Corcoran, are convinced.

Schools without rules: A Sentinel investigation in 2017 found Florida applies precious little oversight to the almost 2,000 private schools paid nearly \$1 billion through state scholarship programs to educate 140,000 students from lower-income families, or with special needs. Some of those schools are depriving students, their families and taxpayers of the quality education and safe learning environment they deserve. Legislators, who have demanded accountability from public schools, need to apply more scrutiny to scholarship schools.

Opioid epidemic: Florida has not been spared from the national plague of addiction to heroin and related legal and illegal painkillers. Some 5,300 state residents died from overdoses in 2016, a 36 percent jump from 2015. Scott has called on legislators to impose caps on initial opioid prescriptions — a good idea that deserves their support. The governor also has proposed another \$53 million in state and federal funds for addiction prevention, treatment and recovery. But legislators will need to come up with more dollars to make up for cuts in prior years' budgets and attack this epidemic with the resources it demands.

Criminal justice reform: Florida keeps too many people behind bars for minor, nonviolent offenses, at huge cost to taxpayers. Other states have saved their taxpayers billions of dollars without sacrificing public safety by adopting a smarter, more flexible approach to sentencing. It's past time for legislators in Florida to follow suit. Our state also sends juveniles to substandard, often poorly managed facilities that leave many of these kids vulnerable to appalling abuses, and more likely to re-offend after they are released. Legislators need to direct more dollars to salaries for juvenile detention officers, as Scott has proposed, and increase oversight.

Higher education: Last year Scott vetoed a bill that would have permanently expanded merit and need-based aid for public university and college students because it also included cuts in funding for colleges. That means legislators need to take another

crack this year at passing a bill to expand aid permanently, without packaging it with provisions that invite a veto. More funding for university faculty and research, another worthy investment, also fell victim to last year's veto, and deserves to be renewed this year. Upgrading higher education in Florida will do more to strengthen the state's economy over the long term than any direct handouts to employers.

Home rule: House leaders have signaled they intend to step up their onslaught this year on county and city government authority. Bills have been introduced to pre-empt local ordinances on short-term home rentals and tree trimming, and more one-size-fits-all dictates from Tallahassee could be in the pipeline. Legislators need to leave local issues to local governments, whose leaders are most accessible and most accountable to local voters. This is one of the areas where good policy means playing defense against bad bills.