

Florida Legislature favors political values over family values

By Randy Schultz | February 11, 2020



A financial website has concluded what many Floridians already know: This is not a good state for families.

WalletHub placed Florida 39th in its new rankings. Though we were ninth in “family fun” — attractions, fitness centers per capita — other, more important indicators were harsh.

Florida ranked 41st in health and safety, 37th in education and child care and last in affordability. We were 43rd in socio-economics, which includes such factors as job quality, the wealth gap and the percentage of two-parent families.

This dismal finding aligns with the 2018 United Way Florida ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) report. It found that 45 percent of Floridians are poor or live paycheck to paycheck, and are among the working poor.

On the outside, everything is wonderful. Last month, Florida’s unemployment rate hit a record low of three percent.

Despite that historic unemployment number, however, Florida and many other states haven’t been creating enough high-quality jobs — the kind that stabilize families. It’s the frustrating back story of the decade-long economic expansion.

One might expect a smart Legislature to address these problems. Unfortunately, the Legislature’s priorities don’t align with Florida’s needs. To review:

The first major bill out of the Florida Senate this year would require written consent from a parent or guardian before a minor could have an abortion. If the House goes along, which is almost certain, Gov Ron DeSantis will sign it. That legislation is about Republican politics, not helping at-risk Floridians.

Elsewhere, Tallahassee wants to make it all but impossible to propose constitutional amendments through petition drives. Support for this rights restriction comes from business groups that oppose the campaign to raise Florida’s minimum wage to \$15. Higher pay would mean fewer working poor Floridians.

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Another petition drive seeks to have Florida expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Doing so could bring health care coverage to 800,000 working poor Floridians whose employers don't offer it. Despite the potential economic benefits, Republican legislators refuse to act,

Separately, the Legislature wants to abolish the Constitution Revision Commission. This panel meets every 20 years — the next would be in 2038 — and can put amendments on the ballot without legislative approval. If both of these efforts succeed, the Legislature will have near-total control of what amendments voters see.

Tallahassee also wants to allow vacation rental companies free rein to destroy residential neighborhoods. Large corporations want more tax breaks, which would deprive the state of money for basic services. Legislators are preparing again to raid the affordable housing trust fund, which can provide down payments for the working poor to buy a home.

And last year, the priority for Senate President Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, was new toll roads. They will get large state subsidies to bring suburban sprawl to rural areas. The Florida Chamber of Commerce is fighting the minimum wage increase but backed toll roads, which will benefit chamber members that build roads and houses.

Galvano claimed that the new toll roads will make it easier to evacuate in advance of hurricanes and help local economies. But emergency management experts question the effectiveness of mass evacuation and local officials told legislators that existing highways don't help local businesses. Representatives from the small town of Alva in Lee County said the new road would wipe out their community.

Republicans would note that they are planning to raise salaries for public school teachers, some of whom are among those working poor. But an asterisk comes with that effort.

DeSantis and the Legislature have not identified a dedicated source of money — such as a sales-tax increase — for those raises. They intend to use new revenue and move money around.

With that approach, state-financed raises would end with the first economic slump. Legislators then would tell local school districts — which Tallahassee has shorted for years — to make up the difference. Moreover, the GOP plan would give proportionally smaller raises to older teachers.

The 2020 Legislature's agenda is the 2020 election. The goal is to drive Republican turnout by stressing abortion and E-Verify, and to attract Democrats with money for education and the environment. It could help deliver Florida for President Trump. It won't make Florida more family-friendly.

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