



Winners emerging from the 2020 Legislative Session

We're not saying there weren't any losers this year.

By Peter Schorschon | April 6, 2020

Everyone loves a winner.

That's why we're doing something different at Florida Politics. Instead of presenting you with a list of winners and losers, we're focusing only on the winners. We're not saying there weren't any losers this year, but in these turbulent times, why should we knock someone for trying and failing, regardless of how the epic the fail.

Here's to the state workers and dietitians, the budget writers and lobbyists, the advocates, and the agitators. The state of Florida salutes you — even if you couldn't finish the 2020 Legislative Session on time.

The Biggest Winners

Show us the money

For the past decade, housing advocates called on legislators to fully fund the Sadowski Affordable Housing Trust Fund. They made calls, sent letters, and pleaded with the Legislature to make money available for affordable housing. And every year, they were left disappointed.

Until 2020.

For the first time in about 10 years, the Florida Legislature will not sweep the affordable housing trust funds. Instead, they'll set aside \$370 million for affordable housing throughout the state. Not only is it a big win for Floridians who are more in need of safe and affordable housing than ever, but it's also a big win for our local economies. It's estimated this funding will create more than 30,000 jobs and generate more than \$4.4 billion in economic impact in the state's Sadowski Coalition cities.

The Sadowski Coalition celebrated the news.

"The Governor and the Florida Legislature have shown enormous leadership this year by appropriating all the housing trust fund monies for housing. This is particularly important in light of the COVID-19 emergency. Using housing trust funds for housing has the greatest positive economic benefit for the state," said **Jaimie Ross**, facilitator of the coalition.

"Using all the housing trust funds for housing should be the new normal now. Housing Florida's workforce, seniors, and special needs populations living on fixed incomes is critical. And with the Governor's Disaster Declaration, these funds can also be used to address the exacerbation of the housing crisis due to job loss caused by this health crisis. We applaud the Governor and the Florida Legislature."

Now the big question is, will lawmakers make the same decision in 2021? We sure hope so.

'The Year of the Nurse'

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared 2020 the "Year of the Nurse," and nowhere was that more evident than the Florida Legislature.

There was the time the "doctor of the day" in the Florida House was really the "Nurse Practitioner of the Day." There was an abundance of white lab coats and nurse practitioners walking the halls of the Capitol. And of course, there was the legislation that expanded the scope of practice.

Sponsored by Rep. **Cary Pigman** and Sen. **Ben Albritton**, the legislation allows advanced practice registered nurses to practice advanced or specialized nursing without physician supervision. It also allows them to act as a patient's primary care provider, provide a signature or certification that is currently required to be provided by a physician, certify the cause of death, and sign death certificates.

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The legislation — which overwhelmingly cleared the House and Senate — is a significant step toward expanding access to health care, especially in underserved areas.

Give 'em a boost

Call it election-year politics. If that's what it takes to get state workers a **salary bump**, we don't care. Florida will give state workers a 3%, across the board wage increase, boosting salaries for thousands of employees across the state. The raise comes after state workers have been neglected in the state budget year-after-year. In fact, in the past 12 years, state workers have received a raise only twice. The raises wouldn't have been possible without the support of a wide range of legislators, including Sen. **Bill Montford**, a Tallahassee Democrat and **longtime advocate** for state workers. A tip of the hat also goes to AFSCME, led by longtime political director **Jacqui Carmona**, who took a bipartisan approach to raises for state workers.

Winners

Woman on top

It's not easy to be the only statewide elected Democrat, but Agriculture Commissioner **Nikki Fried** once again proved she could hang in the GOP boys club.

When a House committee OK'd a proposal to shift Office of Energy oversight from the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Fried fought back, calling the move a **partisan power grab**. That was a bold move for a Cabinet member who has tried to put state before Party.

Fried kept it up throughout Session, explaining to lawmakers that since the agency was relocated to DACS in 2011, it thrived. And that approach — combined with the full weight of the Democratic caucus behind her — worked.

The Senate did not pursue the change, and the final budget negotiated between Sen. **Rob Bradley** and Rep. **Travis Cummings** **did not include** the controversial reorganization.

But that isn't the only reason Fried deserves a fist bump. In the waning days of the 2020 Session, as Florida laid out an action plan to combat the spread of COVID-19, Fried **announced** the state's Division of Food, Nutrition and Wellness would continue to provide meals for students displaced from the classroom because of the virus.

Look for Fried to continue to play a significant role in 2020 — and beyond. With the presidential election just around the corner, Fried will undoubtedly serve as a top Florida surrogate for the Democratic nominee.

Vape no more

Florida is working to curb teenage vaping, and parents across the state have Attorney General **Ashley Moody** to thank for that.

Moody took swift action after a fact-finding mission this summer, **launching a teen-vaping investigation** involving 20 companies and leading the multistate investigation into JUUL.

But that wasn't enough for Moody, now in her second year as Attorney General. She also began working with lawmakers to craft legislation to curb the youth vaping epidemic.

Her campaign worked.

Legislation — sponsored by Sens. **David Simmons** and **Anitere Flores** and Rep. **Jackie Toledo** — is now **headed to the Governor** for his approval. The bill increases the minimum age to purchase tobacco products to 21 and prohibits the sale of flavored nicotine products.

We agree with Moody; this bill is necessary "to stop underage vaping and protect our children."

Call her Madam President

It had the potential to be a legislative distraction, but the battle to rule the Florida Senate in 2022-24 was anything but.

In November, Majority Leader **Kathleen Passidomo**, a Naples Republican, secured enough votes to **become the Senate President in 2022** (assuming Republicans keep the upper chamber). The announcement came after a yearlong campaign against Sen. **Travis Hutson**, a St. Augustine Republican.

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But the battle for the presidency was far from the knockdown, drag-out fight we're seeing play out on the national stage. Instead, the two ended the race on good terms, with Hutson saying they agreed she would be "the best one to lead the chamber going forward." All he asked was that she treats everyone the same and let Senators "work together for a common cause."

It's easy to see how a potentially contentious race took a cordial turn. Passidomo is one of the most well-liked Senators in the chamber. We look forward to calling her Madam President very soon.

The chairs have it

They're the guys who everyone wants to know — and this year, Sen. Bradley and Rep. Cummings had their work cut out for them.

While early estimates showed the state could be seeing less revenue in fiscal 2020-21, a beginning of Session bump gave the House and Senate appropriations chairs something for which to be thankful. The two men worked closely within their respective chambers to draft thoughtful budgets and worked quickly to adjust them to battle the spread of COVID-19.

It's clear this pair of legislators are workhorses, so we'll forgive them this one time for not landing the plane on time. We can say for sure: The Legislature won't be the same without them in 2021.

Speaker rising

Sure, it may seem like low-hanging fruit, but we're calling it: House Speaker-Designate **Chris Sprowls** had a very good, nay, excellent, year.

Remember that at-home DNA test you got as a stocking stuffer? Thanks to Sprowls, your results won't be used against you.

The Palm Harbor Republican **spearheaded the effort** to prohibit life insurers and long-term care insurers from canceling, limiting or denying coverage based on genetic information. With an assist from Sen. **Kelli Stargel** in the Senate, Sprowls persuaded his colleagues to approve legislation to "close a major loophole that threatened to expose private DNA data to life, long-term care and disability insurers."

The **legislation** is not only a major victory for Floridians and consumers, but it is also likely to make the Sunshine State a model for ensuring genetic information is kept private and can't be used against consumers. And that's definitely a place we want to be.

But our privacy wasn't the only thing Sprowls was protecting. He helped push through "Jordan's Law," which further protects Florida's children, and led the House in investigating Chinese payments to researchers, colleges and universities.

If this year was any indication, the future is bright for this rising Speaker.

Credit where credit is due

We didn't hear a lot about the Senate Democratic leader-designate, and that's a good thing.

The talk heading into 2020 was whether **Gary Farmer** was up to the task. His fundraising efforts for the Party's Senate campaign operation had **failed to impress** and serious candidates for competitive Senate seats had failed to materialize.

Questions about his personal life only amplified concerns.

But once the Session actually began, it became clear that the Fort Lauderdale Democrat was settling into his role by managing to do what all good leaders do — let his members take the lead.

In this space, we have been often critical of the Broward Senator but not this year.

For Democrats, we know many are hoping that style continues and is translated into a few heretofore elusive electoral victories and with reapportionment right around the corner, possibly a flip in the chamber long-dominated by the GOP.

Points for the point man

Rep. **Alex Andrade**, a freshman Republican, was the House point man for some of the highest-profile issues of Session: alimony reform, pharmacy benefit managers and transportation.

He was also the driving force behind HB 81, which will go down as his most significant victory for the 2020 Legislative Session.

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The bill, which is ready for the Governor's signature, will expand the authority of public schools to bill Medicaid for public health issues for their students.

Only about 15% of students meet the individualized education plan or finding of disability to meet current requirements. The change could pull down additional federal dollars for mental health, speech pathology and physical therapy in public schools.

Did all of his bills pass? No. But all of them were heard and had a fair shot, which is more than can be said for most.

As a successful lawyer and former gubernatorial fellow, Andrade entered his first term in a full sprint. He's one to watch and will likely be on the shortlist for House leadership in the coming years.

Legacy-making legislation

This year, the Legislature finally passed a bill outlawing the import and export of shark fins in Florida. Shark finning — the practice of removing the fin and tossing the shark — is already banned in the state, but advocates of the bill say as long as fins can be bought and sold in Florida, the inhumane practice will continue.

Coconut Creek Rep. **Kristin Jacobs** was instrumental in making sure the pleas of conservation activists were heard and led the effort by again sponsoring the House version of the bill in 2020. For her efforts, lawmakers passed an amendment naming the law the "Kristin Jacobs Ocean Conservation Act."

While the legislative win was significant, Jacobs didn't hog the limelight — her humbleness shone through in her willingness to share the credit with others.

She thanked House Speaker **José Oliva** and Rep. **Toby Overdorf** for getting it through its last hurdles. She credited Hutson for sponsoring the Senate companion. She also attributed the shift in the tide to the lobbying efforts of organizations such as Shark Allies and the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation.

But Jacobs' priority bill was one small part of an impactful 2020 Session. Even more impressive was the Coconut Creek Democrat's tireless dedication to her constituents, whom she is willing to go to bat for from a hospital bed — literally.

She delivered much to the people in her Broward County district while enduring a grueling battle with cancer. Imagine if we could all have a representative with that kind of work ethic.

Affairs of the state

No one said being the chairman of the House State Affairs Committee was sexy. But Chairman **Blaise Ingoglia** made it look good this Session.

Ingoglia clearly demonstrated that staunch conservatism and innovative policy advancement can go hand-in-hand. His time in the chair this Session led to transformative water quality legislation and helped pave the way for electric vehicle infrastructure in the Sunshine State.

The former chairman of the Florida GOP is just hitting his stride. Look for the Spring Hill Republican to take on more transformational legislation in his final two years in office, leaving a lasting mark on Florida.

No stinkin' caps

The House keeps putting out trial balloons about capping THC in smokable marijuana. As ever, the 2020 push went over like a lead zeppelin.

There is little logic behind the policy. For medical marijuana patients who need THC, limiting the concentration of the psychoactive chemical simply forces them to smoke more. It's no different from chopping a Tylenol in half — the phrase isn't "take four and call me in the morning."

Still, Rep. **Ray Rodrigues** resurrected the idea for 2020 and was met with fierce opposition in the Senate. The effort to defeat the cap was spearheaded by Sen. **Jeff Brandes**, who knew it was coming the moment Oliva suggested it was a "priority," arguing new super-strains in Europe produce "schizophrenic results, especially in young, developing brains."

There was a sliver of support in the Senate. Sen. **Gayle Harrell**, the Stuart Republican who chairs the Health Policy committee, filed language that would grant Oliva's wish.

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But the St. Petersburg Republican, backed up by pro-cannabis veterans' groups, stood firm: No cap. Especially not through an amendment introduced on "day 50-something" of the Legislative Session.

He won. And veterans — and all medical marijuana patients — were granted a reprieve from the Legislature interfering in their doctors' orders, for at least another year.

Drive on, my friend

Miami drivers, rejoice! Congestion on the Palmetto Expressway could soon be a thing of the past, and drivers have Sen. **Manny Diaz Jr.** and Rep. **Bryan Avila** to thank for it.

The pair of Miami lawmakers filed legislation to prohibit the Florida Department of Transportation from operating express lanes or imposing tolls on State Road 826, aka the Palmetto Expressway. The proposal also called on FDOT to remove all existing express lanes and tolls from the road.

But not all change comes from legislation.

In February, FDOT announced it was taking steps to reduce congestion on the roadway. The state agency said it worked closely with legislative leaders to identify solutions, which include modified access points and revised lane configurations throughout the corridor. Officials also said they were working to make the express lanes free for at least a year.

Still standing

The Constitutional Revision Commission is here to stay — for now.

State lawmakers had their sights set on abolishing the commission, which meets once every 20 years to revise the state's constitution after a host of bundled constitutional amendments were approved in 2018. But as the 2020 Session came to a close, so did their efforts.

This likely won't be the end of the conversation. For instance: While the Leroy Collins Institute said it believes the CRC is "an institution worth saving," it also said there were issues to iron out before the next time the gang meets.

Go outside

Florida's State Parks, truly an underestimated gem in our state, turned 85 this year. A birthday isn't a birthday without presents, and our parks unwrapped some big ones.

A few months ago, the National Recreation and Parks Association awarded them **another Gold Medal Award**, making Florida the only state to win more than one of the biennial awards since 1997. The trophy case now includes four Gold Medals in all.

Now, the budget has landed, and the Legislature put Division of Recreation and Parks Director **Eric Draper** in a position to ensure the state park system becomes the first state to win the award yet again. The budget includes \$37 million to fund state park facility improvements — \$10 million more than the current year's budget.

It's an investment that's sure to pay dividends, too. Last year, state parks and trails had 28 million visitors, generating \$2.6 billion in economic benefit and supporting more than 37,000 jobs. They also collected \$176 million in state sales tax.

All rise

Florida's court system is expanding. And that's a good thing.

The Legislature approved a measure that would create 10 new judgeships in the state. The bill establishes six new county court judges, four in Hillsborough, one each in Lee and Orange, and four new circuit court judges, two in the 9th Judicial Circuit and one each in the 1st Judicial and 14th Judicial.

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The legislation, which is now headed to Gov. **Ron DeSantis**, tracks with a request from the Florida Supreme Court in November. The state's high court identified several factors, including the availability of judges and caseload trends, before making the recommendation.

Sen. Bradley commended the decision, calling it "long overdue." Money to pay for the new positions will be included in the fiscal 2020-21 budget.

Stayin' alive

The Florida tourism industry can breathe a sigh of relief in 2020-21 ... at least on one front.

After a Session's worth of hand-wringing about the fate of VISIT FLORIDA, **the Florida House agreed** to set aside \$50 million for the statewide tourism marketing agency in the upcoming fiscal year.

That's a big win, but here's an even bigger one: A bill to extend the life of VISIT FLORIDA, that languished for months without a House hearing, was eventually approved. While the lower chamber had a bit of agita about extending it for eight years, lawmakers did agree to keep the agency in place for three years.

A huge kudo goes to VISIT FLORIDA CEO **Dana Young**. The former state Legislator worked her magic behind the scenes, meeting with key players and showing the value of VISIT FLORIDA, especially when the sun isn't shining as brightly.

With coronavirus ravaging the state, especially the tourism industry, Young and Co. have their work cut out for them. But at least the industry's biggest cheerleader isn't going dark in when it's needed most.

Props to Prosperity

Call them the guiding force behind the issues that drive the Legislative Session. **Americans For Prosperity-Florida** had its hand in some of the biggest ticket issues during the 2020 Session.

Want to expand the scope of practice? AFP-FL is there for you. Think the state's occupational licensing needs reformed? AFP-FL has your back. Expansion of Florida's school choice program? Yup, they were in on that too.

The Florida arm of the national grassroots organization continues to show its strength, proving year-after-year they're a force not to be messed with. Look out 2021. AFP-FL has its eyes on you.

New College/Florida Poly

The House **dropped a bombshell** midway through the Legislative Session. The plan: merging Florida Poly and New College into the University of Florida and Florida State University.

Rep. **Randy Fine**, the chief proponent of the plan, pitched it as a way to save money. He contended that the number of graduates produced by small schools wasn't worth the cost to taxpayers and argued that folding them into larger schools would reduce overhead and bring costs down.

Though Senate President **Bill Galvano** and other top lawmakers indicated cautious support for the plan, it was derided by politicians — on both sides of the aisle and at both the state and federal levels — whose districts included those schools' campuses.

New College and Florida Poly did the rounds, making their case for continued independence. Their efforts convinced enough lawmakers, including Lakeland's Stargel and Sarasota Sen. **Joe Gruters**, to **kill the plan**.

That'll keep them around for now, but while the bill was defeated, **the idea wasn't**, meaning both schools will need to brush up on their talking points for next Session to stave off another merger effort.

Gold for silver hairs

You can call it a big win for our senior population.

The **Coalition for Silver Solutions** created a team of rivals to advocate for change in the state's long-term care system. The coalition — which included AARP, the Florida Health Care Association, LeadingAge Florida and 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East — worked with the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration and the Department of Elder Affairs to address the challenges families and caregivers are facing.

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The result? Meaningful action to address funding for home and community-based care and streamlining the process to assist consumers with accessing services.

And their successes wouldn't be possible without a little help from their legislative friends. Kudos to Rep. **Jennifer Webb** and Sen. Albritton for managing the sometimes tense coalition to good outcomes.

It's electric

Some say "it's not easy being green," but that was before the Legislature OK'd a bill that could make electric vehicles more viable for the average Floridian.

A key limiting factor to the growth of electric vehicles is charging options. If a driver can't get from point A to point B without running out of juice, there's little point in considering an electric vehicle.

SB 7018, carried through the Senate by Thonotosassa Republican Sen. **Tom Lee**, would address the problem by directing the Florida Department of Transportation to develop and recommend a plan for the development of electric vehicle charging station infrastructure along the State Highway System.

"What this bill tries to start is the conversation around is how do we make sure there's enough charging infrastructure so that if someone wants to drive from Tampa to Tallahassee, there's enough charging infrastructure there," Lee said.

The Governor has made expanding the charging grid a priority — last year, he announced charging stations would be available or under construction at all Florida Turnpike service plazas by New Year's 2020 — and SB 7018 is one of his priorities as well.

It also has a fan in **Elon Musk**, the entrepreneur behind Tesla, who commended the Legislature for passing the bill.

Keep on truckin'

Electric vehicle charging stations weren't the only feature of SB 7018. The bill would also make our roads safer for truckers and drivers alike.

As the country turns to online retailers like Amazon more and more for their goods, our roadways are seeing more and more trucks on the highway, but a federal hours of service rule forces truckers to pull over and rest.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration rule was drafted with the best of intentions: preventing drowsy truckers from veering into neighboring lanes. But it also brought about some new dangers, such as big rigs parked along on-ramps or in ill-equipped rest stops.

This bill will help alleviate the problem.

A provision championed by FDOT Secretary **Kevin Thibault** and the Florida Trucking Association will provide for the creation of emergency staging areas for evacuations.

The facilities would kill two birds with one stone. When they're not being used for emergency response, they'll be purposed for commercial motor vehicle parking — a major win for truckers and everyone else on the highway.

No more surprises

The Florida Association of Health Plans did yeomen's work during the 2020 Legislative Session, ending a long-held balance billing practice by air ambulance companies.

The statewide association supported legislation sponsored by Rep. **Jayer Williamson** and Sen. **Manny Diaz Jr.** that prohibited air ambulance service providers from balance billing its patients. It called on

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commercial health insurers and HMOs to provide reasonable reimbursement to air ambulance services for emergency and nonemergency transport.

It also specified that payment in full of copays, coinsurance and deductibles constitutes the full financial obligation of patient services.

Current rules allow air ambulance providers to lump the balance from the underpaid trips together and split them across the handful of insured patients who needed a helicopter ride to the hospital, a common practice in the health care industry known as cost-shifting. That has resulted in bills up to \$40,000 for some Floridians.

That's now coming to an end, thankfully.

"This is a huge step forward for Florida families that will protect them against unfair, surprise medical bills, especially when they are vulnerable following a catastrophic accident or medical event," said **Audrey Brown Bridges**, the President and CEO of the Florida Association of Health Plans.

Next year, Florida Competes

Lawmakers didn't pass the Florida Competitive Workforce Act this year, but Florida Competes has high hopes for the future.

FCWA is an addition to Florida discrimination laws that simply says you can't deny employment or public housing and accommodations to LGBTQ individuals. Its chances in 2020 weren't helped by Oliva, who said he didn't think such reforms are needed.

Why is Florida Competes still a winner then?

Simply put, there's now a critical mass of support in the Legislature. **Greater numbers** of lawmakers signed on as co-sponsors to the measure every year. Combine that with backing from Florida's major employers, small businesses, and the FCWA's tremendous support in most polls, and it's an inevitability. This time, saying "maybe next year" isn't a dismissal, but something to a.

Fracking fizzles out

Remember all the hullabaloo about passing a fracking ban this year? Yeah, neither do we.

Bills to ban fracking in Florida died during the 2020 Legislative Session, marking another year where a one-time topic du jour was pushed to the background. While a bill by Sen. **Bill Montford** cleared the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee on a 5-0 vote, it never progressed any further. Meanwhile, a House bill sponsored by Rep. **Heather Fitzenhagen** never even got a hearing.

So why didn't anything happen this year? Perhaps it's because fracking isn't happening in the state of Florida. Or maybe it's because Gov. DeSantis has said he opposes fracking, which means it's unlikely the Florida Department of Environmental Protection will approve a permit.

Let's also give credit to the **Florida Petroleum Council**, which has worked behind the scenes on the issue for several years. No fracking ban is good for business, regardless of whether permits are getting approved

This one goes to the Sheriffs

The support was there, but then the sheriffs rode into town.

With champions like Brandes and Sen. **Randolph Bracy** at the helm, some thought this could be the year criminal justice reform would have legs in the Legislature. As the 2020 Legislative Session neared its conclusion, Senators pushed bills that would reexamine how courts handled drug trafficking offenses, the length of mandatory minimum sentences, and how to improve programs that help prisoners make a smoother transition.

But some of those same bills never even got a hearing in the House, where they **languished** in subcommittees that hadn't met in weeks.

The reason? We can chalk it up to behind-the-scenes (or maybe not so behind-the-scenes) work of the **Florida Sheriffs Association**. Led by Pinellas County Sheriff **Bob Gualtieri**, the statewide organization pushed hard to ensure the criminal justice system remained unchanged, keeping Floridians safe along the way.

A modern take

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Florida Senior Living Association led the successful effort to pass the assisted living “modernization” bill.

HB 767 by Rep. **Mike Grant** brings about some common sense — yet sorely needed — reforms. The legislation allows assisted living facility and memory care unit residents to use assistive devices such as wearables, transfer aids, and other technologies that seniors who live in their own homes have been using for years.

FSLA, with an assist from the team at **The Southern Group**, says allowing such devices will increase safety and security at ALFs while also reducing on-the-job injuries among direct care workers, who experience one of the highest occupational injury rates in the country.

Seniors are winners, too, as some of the equipment that got the green light, such as arthritis supports and telehealth devices, will help keep them mobile and independent.

As FSLA President **Gail Matillo** puts it: “Whenever we can modernize regulations to make communities safer, not only for residents but also for the health care workers, we’ve made excellent progress for our industry and our state.”

The bill cleared all of its House stops with unanimous support. Thanks to Sen. Harrell’s effort on the companion (SB 402), it earned a unanimous Senate vote and a trip to the Governor’s desk with ease.

Clean bill only

Here’s a lesson in persistence.

In 2018, the Florida chapter of the **National Waste and Recycling Association** supported legislation tweaking residential recycling contracts. Like any good bill dealing with local government, it got off to a rocky start — but all sides were able to compromise and work together. Then came the amendment dealing with deep well injections and then-Gov. **Rick Scott**’s veto pen.

The bill was filed again in 2019, and this time the amendment had to do with plastic straws. Out came DeSantis’ veto pen.

Fast forward to 2020, when Overdorf and Sen. **Keith Perry** filed the same bill. As the 2020 Legislative Session chugged along, the bill inched closer to the finish line. It unanimously cleared both Chambers and is now headed to DeSantis. Here’s hoping his veto pen stays in the drawer this year.

TaxWatch triumphs

Florida TaxWatch has long been known as a player in the capital city, and this year, the TaxWatch team once again proved they’re a force to be reckoned with.

The independent government watchdog celebrated victories on multiple fronts. An advocate for the smart use of tax dollars, the organization advocated for the continuation of VISIT FLORIDA. Their pitch was critical to securing the continuation — and full funding — for the state’s tourism marketing agency.

The organization also pushed for the state to fund the state’s affordable housing trust funds fully, and advocated for increased funding for water quality and Everglades restoration.

But TaxWatch didn’t just shepherd things through the Legislature. The team worked diligently to stop legislation they saw as detrimental to the community. Case in point: The TaxWatch team came out in **opposition** to a House-backed proposal to merge Florida Polytechnic University with the University of Florida and New College with Florida State University.

With so many successes under TaxWatch’s belt during the 2020 Legislative Session, we can’t wait to see what they do with their turkey list.

Radio waves

The Legislature is taking some action to make sure the Department of Management Services finally gets it right on an upgraded Statewide Law Enforcement Radio System.

After years of legal drama and a contract that fell through, lawmakers are directing DMS **to do a new study** to suss out what radio technologies would best serve those who serve us.

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A key component: the tech has to be open-source, and not proprietary. That means the problems that plagued the next-gen radio system's development to this point won't be there in the future, because any competent vendor could step in and take over in the event a contract goes bad.

Police may have to wait a bit longer to get their new walkies, but when they do, they can rest assured they'll be top-notch.

Staving off preemption

Cities and counties are used to getting the short shrift in the Legislature. Preemption bills run rampant, but local governments were once again able to stop a measure that would prohibit them from regulating vacation rentals.

The proposed legislation, sponsored by Sen. **Manny Diaz**, would have preempted the regulation of vacation rentals to the state. The legislation allowed local regulation, so long as it applied to all properties, including owner-occupied homes. These provisions essentially stripped local governments of home rule over the vacation rentals.

Local governments were able to stave off the changes thanks in part to the support of the Florida League of Cities and the Florida Association of Counties, both of which opposed the legislation. They also got an assist from DeSantis, who indicated he supported local regulation.

Healthy carveout

Give nutritionists some credit: They were successful in slimming down a wide-ranging deregulation bill to ensure they weren't included.

While lawmakers were hailed for their work to try and deregulate several industries, groups representing the state's nutritionists and dietitians fought back against attempts to deregulate. Among other things, they expressed concern about deregulating dietitians and nutritionists who work with people in health care facilities or with chronic illnesses.

Their efforts paid off. The legislation, sponsored by Ignoglia and Albritton, was amended on the floor to carve out dietitians and nutritionists from the deregulation efforts. And we think that's good news for our state's most vulnerable population.

Flu season relief

Got a case of the sniffles? Head to the pharmacist.

It took three years, but Florida pharmacists were able to declare victory in their quest to allow pharmacists to "test and treat" for flu, strep and non-chronic conditions. While the battle was long, victory came quickly. DeSantis signed the legislation, sponsored by Rep. **Tyler Sirois** and Sen. Hutson, the same day it was sent to him.

The Sunshine State now joins 17 other states that have expanded the role of pharmacists. The new law, which takes effect July 1, will allow pharmacists to order and interpret tests, as well as change medication for a variety of conditions. It also requires pharmacists to recommend follow up with a doctor if necessary. One other note on the legislation: The swift support came the same day the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 was a pandemic. Nevermore than now did we need all hands on deck.

Staying cool under pressure

Student-athletes have a lot to celebrate this Session after state lawmakers took steps to protect high schoolers from heatstroke.

The Florida Legislature unanimously approved legislation sponsored by Rep. **Ralph Massulo** and Sen. **Janet Cruz** that aims to protect student-athletes participating in sports during hot weather by reducing preventable injury or death.

The legislation — named the Zachary Martin Act after a Florida high school student who died during football practice — requires the Florida High School Athletic Association to identify heat stress levels at which a cooling zone must be made available, establish requirements for cooling zones, require school emergency action plans, and establish hydration guidelines.

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"Heatstroke is 100% avoidable if rapid cooling begins within the first 10 minutes," Massulo said in January.

The bill heads to the Governor's desk for his signature.

Lawyer up

Let's admit it: Trial lawyers get a bad rap in the Florida Legislature — and this year was no exception. Backed by a variety of business organizations, lawmakers put forward legislation that would have limited costs in lawsuits. That included a proposal that would have placed additional restrictions on contingency risk factors for plaintiffs fees in lawsuits against property insurers.

The bill cleared the House but fizzled out in the Senate. And so did several other proposals aimed at so-called lawsuit abuse reform. Give it to the trial attorneys. They know how to get the job done.

Welcome to the innovation sandbox

An overhaul of the state's technology infrastructure could mean good news for innovation.

Lawmakers OK'd legislation this year that aims to, among other things, allow agencies to communicate with each other on the same technology platform. Described by Rep. **Jamie Grant** as the toughest piece of public policy he has ever worked on, the legislation, among other things, upgrades the technology infrastructure and creates a new oversight authority.

It also creates the Financial Technology Sandbox within the Office of Financial Regulation, which will allow some companies the regulatory freedom to experiment with new technologies. And more freedom, in our opinion, means more opportunity to make Florida a leader in financial technology innovations.

Show your pride

Want to give a shoutout to your out-of-state alma mater? Or show your pride for being a member of the Divine Nine? There's a license plate for that.

In the final days of the Legislative Session, state lawmakers OK'd a proposal that will allow Floridians to buy several new specialty plates. And for some, the new plates were years in the making.

Rep. **Geraldine Thompson** can claim a victory after eight years of pushing for a tag for the Divine Nine, the National Pan-Hellenic Council of historically black fraternities and sororities. Formed during segregation, the Greek organizations mentor youth, battle disease and poverty, and raise scholarship funds. Rep. Grant can stop his calls for an Auburn University license plate. The War Eagle plate — along with one for the University of Georgia and the University of Alabama — was included in the final proposal.

Mickey lends a hand

Speaking of license plates: After years of failing to pass legislation to create new license plates, the House of Mouse added their muscle to the effort this year and helped carry the specialty tag revamp bill **over the finish line**.

HB 1135 will also allow Floridians to proudly display their Mickey love on the highway with a new Walt Disney World license plate.

The Schorsch household will have the first plate, of course.

Disney won't be using the tag fees to build a Scrooge McDuck-style money pool, either. The collections will be used to fund the **Make-A-Wish Foundation of Central and Northern Florida**, which helps make dreams come true for children suffering from life-threatening medical conditions.

This isn't said enough: Mickey is a pretty good guy.

Water, water everywhere

It's the lifeblood of our economy, and for the second year in a row, Florida's waterways were clearly a priority

Kudos to state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle working together to make sure water quality remained a priority in 2020. Led by Sen. **Debbie Mayfield**, lawmakers supported aggressive legislation that

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regulates septic tanks, restricts the spread of biosolids stormwater treatment rules, and develops plans to meet waterway cleanup goals.

The Legislature also set aside \$625 million for water quality and Everglades restoration projects, including \$50 million for storage and treatment projects north of Lake Okeechobee.

These actions will go a long way toward improving our most valuable natural resource. Let's keep up the good work in 2021 and beyond.

Educate me

When the dust settles on the 2020 Legislative Session, one thing is clear: Public schoolteachers in Florida will receive a raise.

The Legislature **unanimously approved** an obscure bill that, among other things, gives school districts additional funding for each student who receives an AP capstone diploma in addition to a standard diploma. But thanks to an **amendment** tacked on by the Senate in the eleventh hour, it also creates the infrastructure for salary increases for teachers.

Under the proposal, school districts and charter schools would be required to use their share of the money to increase the minimum base salary for full-time teachers to at least \$47,500. Districts can also use the money, as funding permits, to give a salary boost to other full-time instructional personnel or veteran teachers who make just above the minimum but haven't received a raise in years.

That's not only a big win for public school educators across the state, but also for DeSantis, who made teacher raises a cornerstone of his 2020-21 budget proposal.

Building boom

PECO, get your PECO here!

It was another big year for the University of Florida and other colleges and universities, which are set to receive a **combined \$112 million** in Public Education Capital Outlay funds.

UF pulled in, among other things, another \$35 million for their cutting edge **Data Science Research Lab**. The same project got \$25 million last year. Also making the list: another \$8 for the P.K. Younge Research Development School, which is affiliated with UF.

Florida Atlantic had a banner year grabbing more than \$26 million, including \$15 million for the AD Henderson University Lab School, which was awarded \$11 million last year.

Florida State's College of Business received \$20 million; Florida Gulf Coast's pulled \$15 million for its School of Integrated Watershed and Coastal Studies, and Florida International will get an \$8.3 million check for the next phase of its engineering building.

It all adds up to a significant boost in university PECO cash, which weighed in at \$91 million in the last budget.

College days

Here's something we can agree on: **Bob Boyd** had a heck of a Session.

Tapped in July to lead Independent Colleges & Universities of Florida, Boyd spent a portion of his first Session fending off attempts by the legislators, including Rep. Fine, to massively transform a tuition assistance program for students at private colleges or universities.

The **bill** would have changed eligibility, so only students who can prove financial need would receive a grant. That would have eliminated more than 27,000 current students, or 63% of recipients. That would have meant a big hit to the state's 30 not-for-profit colleges and universities.

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Boyd — along with **Stephen Shiver** with The Advocacy Group at Cardenas Partners, **Brewser Brown** with SKB Consulting Group, and **Cameron Yarbrough** with Ramba Consulting — fought back, organizing hundreds of students to rally for education choice.

Higher learning

After two years of failing to cross the finish line, the third time was a charm for the **College Board**, as the Legislature approved the recognition and additional funding for students who earn an AP Capstone Diploma.

Under HB 614, high schools can get funding equivalent to 30% of a full-time student for each AP Capstone Diploma awarded — a major boon for the schools that are churning out college-ready kids.

If the bill number seems familiar, that's because the College Board's bill turned into the major vehicle for education policy in the 2020 Legislative Session.

On day 58, the Governor's teacher pay priority — the banner legislation in what's been called the "Year of the Teacher" — was added into the bill.

The College Board has been trying for a while, and now they can claim victory on a bill from which teachers and students across the state will benefit.

Give us the records

Our Sunshine State moniker doesn't just come from the gorgeous weather. The public records laws are known around the world for shining a light on how government really works. So why is it that each year, lawmakers look to stifle public records laws?

During the 2020 Legislative Session, there was once again a push to make university presidential searches exempt from public review. Supporters said the effort was needed to draw top candidates to the search.

We call malarkey, and so did the **First Amendment Foundation**.

With **Pamela Marsh**, the newly named President, at its helm, the First Amendment Foundation blocked the effort, ensuring these critical decisions are made in the sunshine.

The pen is mightier

Let's give credit where credit is due: Without **the dogged reporting** of **Mary Ellen Klas** and **Samantha Gross**, it's unclear we would have ever known the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence was misusing funds.

In a series of reports, Klas and Gross revealed **Tiffany Carr**, the former CEO of the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, received more than \$7.5 million since 2016, including an estimated \$5 million in cash payments for paid time off.

Their work prompted legislators to launch an investigation. The House issued subpoenas and **called in several top staffers and board members** to testify. And in March, a Leon County circuit court judge ordered the organizations dissolved.

Klas and Gross continue to advance the story, informing Floridians about the missteps of the agency and its former CEO. As more and more news organizations around the state slash budgets and reporting staffs, Klas and Gross show the important role the media plays in our lives.

Power of the press

All it took was a tip for Tampa Bay Times reporter **Paul Guzzo** to start a movement.

In 2019, a cemetery researcher told Guzzo about death certificates that included a listing for a Zion Cemetery, a burial ground he had never seen. After months of researching, Guzzo and **James Borchuck** found that 800 people were buried in what was believed to be Tampa's first all-black cemetery. Their quest continued, **uncovering** at least a half dozen more lost cemeteries.

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Their work was essential to keeping the history of the community alive, and lawmakers took note. Hat tip to Sen. Cruz, who filed legislation to create a task force on abandoned African American cemeteries across the state. She doggedly pursued the legislation, opting to pitch an appropriation request for cemetery memorials on the Senate floor when the legislation appeared stalled.

Moved by the story, the Senate picked up Cruz's legislation and **unanimously approved it**. While the legislation is unlikely to land on DeSantis' desk this year, you can bet Guzzo and the team will keep the issue in the spotlight.

Article last accessed [here](#) on April 6, 2020.