

Governor Charlie Crist's
2007 State of the State Speech

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Good morning. Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice and members of the Court, members of the Cabinet, the Legislature, honored guests, and my fellow Floridians across our state. Good morning to you all.

It is a privilege to be here this morning for the first time as your new Governor. But in many ways, for me this is a homecoming.

It was in the role of a legislator that I began my public service, and I know the enthusiasm and excitement you feel today as you start your work.

As I begin this morning, I would be remiss if I did not first say thank you. Thank you Ken Pruitt, thank you Marco Rubio, Ray Sansom, thank you Dan Webster, Marty Bowen, Steve Geller, Dan Gelber and Bill Posey, and thank you to every member of the legislature for passing meaningful property insurance reform for the people of our state.

The people of Florida cried out for help and you answered their call. We worked together in a bi-partisan way—the People's Legislature and the People's Governor working for the People's Agenda. We set an example, and we are on the way to lowering rates for our people—and not a moment too soon.

As I look around this chamber, Mr. Speaker, I would also be remiss if I did not welcome the 37 new members of the Florida House of Representatives.

One of your former colleagues is with us today in a new role. Please welcome my partner, my friend, and our Lieutenant Governor, Jeff Kottkamp.

Also in the chamber today, Mr. President, are seven new senators who have been chosen by the voters to come to Tallahassee to get things done. I am highly confident that they will, and I want to congratulate and welcome our newest Senators.

I also want to recognize my family seated in the Gallery— my Mother and Father, my sisters and their families. Thank you for being there for me and always supporting me. I love you very much.

Among those not with us in the chamber, but certainly in our hearts, are the men and women of our armed forces and the Florida National Guard who are serving our country and our state overseas. We are all very proud of them and grateful to them for their sacrifice and the sacrifice of their families in defending our freedom.

Representing our men and women in uniform today is Command Sergeant Major Ronald Watson. He is a highly decorated Soldier who served as the Command Sergeant Major in

charge of all enlisted personnel for Camp Virginia in Kuwait. Let us all rise and thank him for his dedication and the service and the sacrifice of all of our men and women in uniform.

A Governor's first State of State is normally a time to set out an agenda for the year and beyond. And while we will do that today, we must also recognize that much has already been accomplished.

On my first day in office, just a little more than two months ago, I issued an executive order that holds my administration to higher standards of ethical conduct than ever before.

That order also created the Office of Open Government for the purpose of replacing the door, and installing a window into the workings of the People's Government.

And the sun shines through that window.

I also ordered a top-to-bottom review of our customer service operations and the implementation of my Plain Language Initiative. Changes are underway to provide the people with the most ethical, open, and customer-friendly government possible. It is their government after all, and it should serve them well.

Before the New Year was three weeks old, you were already here in special session seeking solutions to runaway property insurance rates.

Thousands of Floridians reached out to tell us they were being forced to choose between paying outrageous insurance premiums or selling their homes. Thousands of Floridians told us soaring insurance premiums were ruining the promise of raising a family in a Florida home. Thousands of Floridians told us their dream of retiring in our beautiful state was vanishing. Floridians like Stan Whitney.

You may remember Stan. He wrote to me last November to tell me how sky rocketing insurance premiums were on the brink of forcing him to move back to his home state of Vermont.

In public service, it is always important to remember, we serve the people—our boss. Stan is our boss. And he is with us here today along with his wife, Joan. Stan, please rise and wave to your employees.

It was with the urging of Stan and thousands of Floridians like him that we were able to pass legislation less than two months ago that will bring much needed relief to our people.

To your great credit, you worked as a team. No one person or party claimed to have all of the answers. In the end we all worked together, and the people got what they have long demanded government to do. That is, focus on results—not politics nor process. We will

continue to work together, to urge the federal government to create a national catastrophic fund. And I know that if we work together, we can succeed.

Not two weeks after the special session, the people of Central Florida awoke in the pre-dawn hours of February 2nd, to devastation wrought by deadly tornadoes.

With winds topping 160 miles per hour, tornadoes, some a quarter of a mile wide, ripped through Lake Mack, Lady Lake, Deland and other Florida communities. All tolled, 21 lost their lives, victims as young as seven to as old as ninety-two.

Within minutes of the tornadoes, with no street lights, downed power lines, fuse boxes exploding, first responders were already moving in.

First responders, emergency managers, information officers, working together, not just from the four affected counties, but all over, responding as a region, and as a compassionate, caring state.

In the Villages, residents signed up, offering bedrooms, even couches to make sure everyone had shelter. The list of those offering help grew so large that there were more offers than people who needed help.

Lake County emergency shelters closed their doors just three days after the tornadoes because families, and friends, and strangers stood up, opened their arms and offered their homes. More than 6,500 people volunteering more than 180,000 hours of time in just the first week alone.

That Sunday after, beside the ruins of Lady Lake Church of God, next to a broken cross, and an American flag, more than a hundred of us, listened to Pastor Lynn, who told us "Life must go on, we must pull together," and we gave thanks to God singing Amazing Grace.

Pastor Lynn, thank you for your inspiration, know that we are here to help you, and know that our work will not be finished until every home, every office and every church is rebuilt.

Pastor Lynn please stand and be recognized today.

While I have been your Governor for just sixty four days, because of the work to make our government more ethical, more open, and more focused on serving the people; because of the service of our first responders, our emergency management team, and thousands of volunteers during this time of disaster; and because of your accomplishments in January working together to reduce the sky rocketing cost of property insurance, I can report to you today:

The state of our State is strong, and it is promising.

But our work is not done. As oppressive as the spiraling costs of property insurance, are out-of control property taxes.

Like the Raulersons, thousands of other Floridians are trapped in their homes, or worse still, cannot afford a home at all.

The American dream of home ownership is being crushed under the weight of property taxes. It will require bold and decisive leadership to reverse this trend and make the Florida dream more affordable. Leadership that must come from this room – from each and every one of us.

Our families cannot be secure if their homes are at risk.

Our people cannot be productive if they are consumed with worry. Our state cannot be a place of opportunity if we cannot fulfill the American promise of home ownership. I have set forth a plan to reduce property taxes by doubling your homestead exemption, making the save our homes protection portable and extending that protection to business and rental properties as well.

Whatever form of property tax relief you decide upon, it must be comprehensive, it must bring real relief to our people, and it must be put before the voters this year. Our people deserve real relief, and with your leadership—I know they will get it.

Just as affordable home ownership should be an American birthright, so should the promise of an excellent public education. Education is not just an obligation, it is a civil right—it is the equal opportunity provider, and it ensures that all of our children have an equal opportunity to participate in the American dream.

And let me say this—Civil rights is simply a matter of doing what is right. And we will always pursue what it right.*

Central to the success of public education are Florida's teachers. They are the bedrock upon which we build our children's future. We all remember that special teacher that made a difference in our lives. For me, it was Ms. Bolling, my fifth grade teacher.

As a state, we owe more to these fine people of whom we have asked so much. But have we lived up to our responsibilities?

Stephen please stand and be recognized.

Because we are losing fine teachers like Stephen, this session I have proposed that we spend almost 300 million dollars to increase the pay for our teachers. Under our proposal, we would increase teacher pay by 10% for the top 25% of our teachers.

This represents a doubling of the current program and will go a long way toward keeping and retaining Florida's best teachers. And it will not be based on a test alone.

But we should do more. I have proposed in my budget 3.8 billion dollars to meet the constitutional mandate of the class size amendment. This is a 19% increase over the current budget level and would bring state funding for the last five years to 10.7 billion dollars. Smaller classes provide a better environment for learning and we must fulfill our obligation to provide that funding to reduce class sizes.

We must do all that we can to help every child read at grade level. Florida currently employs more than 2,000 reading coaches to help students increase their reading and comprehension skills.

I ask the Legislature to approve another \$26 million to recruit and employ an additional 400 reading coaches statewide. By bringing the number of coaches up to 2,400, we will be able to provide one reading coach for every 20 teachers. I am confident that the ability of our students to read will continue to rise as a result.

Our budget proposal also includes \$10 million to fund Pathways to Success – a virtual tutoring program. This tool will provide a way for every student to have access to teaching at a time that is convenient for them.

I also propose an increase in funding for our state universities and community colleges—without raising tuition.

We must raise the profile of all children's issues, from education to health. As stewards of this state, our greatest obligation is to our children. But often it is their voice that goes unheard, or overlooked.

Our children need a voice. They need to be at the table because soon—it will be their table. That is why I will support the creation of a "Children's Cabinet" to coordinate state services and oversee child welfare issues.

From a Children's Cabinet, to increasing the emphasis on physical education in our schools, to providing financial incentives for adoption, our children must be our first priority.

And in caring about our children, we must think of the Florida they will inherit. Florida's beauty is the reason why so many of us are here. We have an obligation to protect the land, the water, and the air for generations to come.

To that end I am proposing that we continue the state's commitment to restoring America's Everglades by appropriating 100 million dollars for that purpose, as well as 40 million to clean up the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and 50 million for Lake Okeechobee.

It is worth noting that the dramatic rise in our insurance premiums did not occur without cause. It occurred in large part because of an equally dramatic rise in the number and

intensity of hurricanes that battered our state in recent years.

This simple fact reflects a challenge that we ignore at our own peril. I am persuaded that global climate change is one of the most important issues that we will face this century.

With almost 1,200 miles of coastline and the majority of our citizens living near that coastline, Florida is more vulnerable to rising ocean levels and violent weather patterns than any other state. Yet, we have done little to understand and address the root causes of this problem, or frankly, even acknowledge that the problem exists.

No longer. Following this legislative session, I will bring together the brightest minds to begin working on a plan for Florida to explore groundbreaking technologies and strategies that will place our state at the forefront of a growing world-wide movement to reduce greenhouse gases. Florida will provide not only the policy and technological advances, but the moral leadership, to allow us to overcome this monumental challenge.

But during this session, we can take the first bold steps in moving toward alternative fuels and other alternative sources of energy. I have proposed almost 70 million dollars in my budget to foster the development and use of alternative energy sources and fuels in our state, including ethanol and biodiesel fuels for our cars and solar power for our homes.

There is no reason why, as Commissioner Bronson has pointed out, that the Sunshine state cannot be the national leader in the production of alternative energy. With these measured steps, we can begin to achieve three important goals: addressing global climate change, promoting Florida agriculture, and weaning our country from reliance on foreign oil.

We can improve schools, we can lower taxes and insurance premiums, and we can protect our environment, but if we fail to afford our most vulnerable citizens basic safety and security, we will not have discharged our duty to the people who elected us.

That is why I have proposed the Anti-Murder Act. I can tell you a thousand reasons why we must pass this legislation this year my friends, but it comes down to this: I have witnessed firsthand the unimaginable limits of human grief when a parent loses a child to violent crime. Until you have listened to a father or a mother who have seen the light of their lives extinguished by the monstrous assault of a violent felon, you cannot know the enormity of the threat we face.

We owe our parents the simple assurance that we have done everything within our power to prevent these atrocities from ever happening again. I have sent to the House and Senate our Anti-Murder Bill.

I would ask that you continue your good work by taking the bill up this first week, passing it, and sending it to my desk so that I may sign it as the first law of this session.

Let us send a clear message to violent criminals if they violate probation, they are going

back to jail where they can do no further harm to our people and our children.

Let the lives of Sarah Lunde, Jessica Lunsford, Carlie Brucia and the Deltona Six be honored with the passage of this Act that will help prevent future children from becoming victims. These are just some of the issues that are worthy of your talents and of your attention. I hope you will also consider our initiative to build upon the progress already made to restore confidence in our voting process by funding voting machines that provide a tangible record of every vote cast—a paper trail. Let's end this controversy for once and for all.

I also ask for your support of my proposal to establish 20 million dollars to make Florida a national leader in the research of adult, amniotic, and umbilical cord stem cells. Stem cell research holds the promise of unlocking the secrets to cure diseases like Alzheimers and Parkinsons and many others, and Florida should champion this research.

Finally, I ask that you give us the tools to spur economic development for the film and space industries. In my budget I have proposed 75 million dollars of tax credits to enhance Florida film making- a clean and vital industry which creates high paying jobs while spot lighting our beautiful state.

Florida is the place where America literally reaches for the stars, so we must also continue to incentivize the private space industry to retain our preeminence in this field. My friends, our time in public service is truly a gift, and it is a precious gift, but it is a fleeting gift. It is a gift to bring real change now and help our people in profound ways for generations to come.

Will we take this gift of public service and use our time here together to bring meaningful reform to Florida? Or will we waste it through neglect or partisan divide?

You know I am an optimist. I believe we will not waste this gift, this trust. I believe we will work together with a sense of urgency and purpose, as we did on insurance reform. We will work together not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Floridians to make our neighborhoods more safe, improve our children's education, and protect the beauty that is Florida.

I am fond of a quote from Robert Kennedy that he gave in his run for the Presidency. We can tailor his words and think of them as this: "Some people see things as they are and say, Why? I dream of a better Florida and say, Why not?"

Can Florida be the best state in America in educating its children? Why not?

Can Florida lead the nation in job growth in high paying jobs? Why not?

Can we ensure that Florida remains affordable by cutting taxes and returning to the people more of their hard earned money? Why not?

Can Florida be the safest place in America to live, raise a family and retire? Why not?

And can we keep our state beautiful, protect her natural resources and lead the nation in protecting our environment? Of course we can—We are Floridians.

Who among us would say we cannot achieve these goals. Who here would say that we cannot make this Florida's greatest century?

As long as we remember that we serve the people, and we work together to do what is right, all of these goals can be achieved.

We are in this room only because of the people of Florida allow us to be here. It is they, and not we, who possess this power. It is we, and not they, who are the servants. So let us serve them well.

And if we do, I believe that those who may gather in this room or stand in this place, ten or twenty or fifty years from now will be able to say that this was a special time when good men and good women came together for the common good and made Florida truly the brightest star in the American sky.

I look forward to working with each of you. Thank you. God bless you, and God bless our beautiful Florida.