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Gov. Charlie Crist's State of the State address

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Text of Gov. Charlie Crist's State of the State address as prepared for delivery Tuesday and provided by his staff:

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Good evening, Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Lt. Governor, Madam Chief Justice and members of the Court, members of the Cabinet, members of the Legislature, honored guests and my fellow Floridians. Good evening to you all.

I would like to take a moment and acknowledge the woman I fell in love with while serving as your Governor, the First Lady of Florida, my wonderful wife. Carole, I love you very much. I don't know what I would do without you.

This evening, more than 3,000 members of the Florida National Guard are proudly serving our country in Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Not since Allied troops trained on Florida shores nearly 70 years ago have so many Floridians fought to protect our freedoms. On behalf of these thousands of Floridians, please welcome two members of our outstanding Florida National Guard.

With us tonight is Sergeant Michael Makai. While serving in Afghanistan, his determination and selfless service were vital in the detachment's success. In addition to ensuring minimum down-time for Sentinel air defense radar, he volunteered his time assisting the medical team when a high number of casualties were brought in.

Also with us tonight is Staff Sergeant Paul Ligman, a West Point graduate whose military career has spanned four decades. One month ago today, after a training exercise in preparation for his detachment's deployment to Afghanistan, a bus carrying soldiers overturned in Clay County. Staff Sergeant Ligman swiftly rescued several soldiers, in spite of his own injuries, minimizing injury and loss during this unexpected event.

Sergeant Makai and Staff Sergeant Ligman, thank you for your service to this great country of ours.

Tonight I also want to recognize the generous outpouring from Floridians toward our neighbors in Haiti in the wake of January's tragic earthquake. Florida immediately extended a helping hand.

With us tonight is a child protective investigator for the Department of Children and Families. Born in Haiti and fluent in Creole, he was one of many who provided comfort to those arriving at Sanford International Airport. Much to his surprise, his own aunt walked

off a plane and into his arms, answering the questions he and his family had about her safety. Welcome tonight Mr. Val Dambreville.

Val represents the many caring Floridians who welcomed more than 25,000 Haitian-Americans, Haitian orphans and severely wounded evacuees who fled the destruction. For the critically injured, Florida hospitals and doctors stepped up and saved lives, treating those in need.

I thank Interim Director Dave Halstead and the professionals at the Division of Emergency Management, the Florida National Guard under the able direction of the Adjutant General, Major General Douglas Burnett, and Secretary George Sheldon and his team at the Department of Children and Families.

Gathered here tonight are some of Florida's most dedicated public servants. All of you rank among the best and brightest minds our state has to offer.

On behalf of tens of thousands of Florida employers: Thank you for taking swift action to help our economy on this opening day of the 2010 Legislative Session. Your commitment to delay a significant increase in the unemployment compensation tax has provided relief to Florida businesses at a time they need it most. I look forward to signing this important legislation as soon as it comes to my desk.

Today, we have sent a resounding message to the people and businesses of Florida: Job retention and creation is our number one goal. I salute you and encourage you to relish the day. The enthusiasm you feel today will prove to be a useful and precious resource during the next 59 days.

For me, this day is bittersweet, as this is my last State of the State Address as your Governor. I have immensely enjoyed working with you, and most importantly, working for the people of Florida as Governor. There is no greater calling than to serve our fellow man - especially during difficult times - and I have been grateful for each and every day during the past three years. I will never forget my time as Governor, nor the kindness and unselfishness of those I have served alongside.

For Floridians, these days are also bittersweet. We face trying times, but we must never forget that the promise of Florida still burns brightly. When the rest of the country shivers, we bask in the warmth of our winter sun. People from around the globe are drawn to our white-sand beaches, the endless vista of the Everglades, and rivers with water as clear as the air above them.

When they seek the fulfillment of the American Dream, they see our cities pulsing with the energy of new ideas spoken in a dozen languages. These things have been and always will be the fundamental promise of Florida.

But in the last few years, the promise of bright horizons has been marred by dark clouds. The worst recession in generations has brought us more than our fair share of strife. Businesses have buckled, people have lost jobs, and the abundance and financial security we took for granted just a few years ago seem distant memories.

But I tell you: This recession, as bad as it has been, will also be a distant memory one day. I understand that we still face tough times ahead. But the promise of our Florida remains strong and with your help, we can make that promise even stronger.

After stalling last year, Florida's population is once again growing. The University of Florida predicts that our state will grow by 300,000 people each year for the next five years. Single family home sales in 2009 exceeded sales in 2007 and, amazingly, are above the historic average. Beginning in 2011, we anticipate most job sectors will once again grow.

We should be mindful that difficult times reveal enormous opportunities. Some of Florida's greatest corporate citizens were started in financial downturns Burger King, Disney, Publix. Like these great organizations, Florida can use this opportunity to gain ground on our competition states like California and New York in drawing businesses and talent to our state.

The adversity we have faced reveals the character of our people and makes us stronger. Shakespeare noted with more than a little irony that "when the sea was calm, all boats alike show'd mastership in floating." Today we face a far more difficult test and will be judged by the mastership we show while the sea roils around us.

I have a fishing boat I named Freedom, and in it, I have spent many wonderful days on our beautiful Gulf and my beloved Tampa Bay. I know from experience that storms often come from nowhere. What begins as a tiny shift in the wind can - in a matter of minutes - be a squall that sends waves crashing over the gunwale. The real test of a captain is how he guides his boat through the fury of a storm.

To bring the ship of our Florida safely back to harbor requires action, not rhetoric. It requires knowledge, not conjecture. And it requires composure under pressure that believes in a fairer shore somewhere beyond the dark clouds - and a belief we will return home safely.

During this legislative session, you will debate hundreds of issues important to Floridians.

It is not only the substance of those issues that is important; it is also the attitude with which you address them. These will determine whether you have done your job well for the people of Florida - whether you are a good captain in a storm.

In our first year, we guided our state through the storm of skyrocketing property taxes and property insurance. We worked together to enact meaningful property insurance reform and the largest tax cut in Florida history. Thank you, for helping us get this done for the people of Florida.

Three years later, Floridians are better off because of those insurance reforms and by the diligence of Insurance Commissioner Kevin McCarty, through his rejection of unjustified insurance premium hikes. Through these actions, property insurance premiums are lower today than they were in January of 2007.

Property owners were seeing double-digit percentage increases in taxes levied prior to the beginning of my administration. Now, they have seen significant decreases over the past three years. Due to these tax cuts and lower values, 2009 property taxes were almost \$3 billion below 2007 property taxes.

Senator Altman, we agree that does, indeed, qualify as "dropping like a rock."

And we must continue to be problem solvers. We were not given the privilege of serving the good people of Florida to simply make grand pronouncements. We were given the privilege to serve so that we can make the everyday lives of ordinary Floridians better.

During these very difficult economic times, we do a disservice to the people who elected us - the people who are counting on us - to elevate ideology over problem-solving. We are here to guide our ship through a storm. We are here to lead this state to that fairer shore.

How can we be problem-solvers? By embracing our core principles and having the wisdom to separate the trivial from the meaningful. And I am confident of my core principles and what is meaningful to me - and to the people of Florida.

I believe government should be smaller, not larger. And that we can envision a day when government is half as large and twice as effective. Government must live within its means, or it will destroy our future.

I believe taxes should be lower, not higher. I believe in freedom, knowing that with it comes the duty of personal responsibility. Government has a legitimate role in protecting the most vulnerable among us, and where government is needed, it should be efficient, making a real difference.

While there is great virtue in being true to your principles, conviction must be tempered with practicality and pragmatism. Taken to an extreme, conviction becomes inflexible even destructive. Extreme views rarely solve problems and frequently create them. Look around the globe. Can't we agree our world would be better with less overheated rhetoric and more common sense?

You should know, however, that our practical solutions will serve only to further inflame the extremists. Take heart, knowing that it is we problem solvers and not they who will move our Florida forward. We must accept being in the arena means enduring the hecklers in the cheap seats where conviction abounds, but wisdom is not required and nothing is either risked or gained.

Problem solvers recognize that important achievements often require consensus, and consensus sometimes requires concession. There are times we must hold loosely to our cherished conceits in the interest of meaningful change. We also must recognize that consensus often means all parties walk away feeling vaguely dissatisfied.

Some of America's greatest achievements resulted from this principle. As you may recall from your history lessons, in 1789 enormous controversy endangered the ratification of the first U.S. Constitution. The entire future of our young country dangled by a thread. Anti-federalists some of them Founding Fathers - argued that our Constitution failed to protect individual liberties. So, James Madison proposed ten amendments - known today as the Bill of Rights - to make clear the sanctity of the individual. These amendments allowed ratification of the Constitution, completing the framework that underpins the entire history of our great nation.

Allow me to offer a modern example of where consensus could benefit the people of Florida: The Seminole gaming compact.

This compact, should you approve it, potentially raises billions of dollars for the practical purpose of educating Florida's children.

Some of you oppose it because you find gambling distasteful. On a personal level, you should know, I'm not a big fan of gambling either. It holds no real intrigue for me, and much like the legislative process itself, over the long run only a fool would bet against the house.

President Atwater, you should know I feel exactly the same way about the Senate.

But nevertheless, I recognize that sometimes my personal biases have to give way to a broader and more important reality. And so I consider these facts:

- I was elected to serve the people of Florida, not impose upon them my personal likes and dislikes.
- The people of Florida very much need the money that this compact can provide for critically important services. It can be used to improve their lives in profound ways, including educating our schoolchildren.

Whether we approve this compact or not, it does not alter the reality that the Seminoles are currently running a number of casinos in Florida and, in fact, have been running gaming operations for decades. And to date, the citizens of Florida have received no direct financial benefit from their operations.

So, given that Florida desperately needs the money - and given that gambling already occurs in our state - and given that we all love freedom, doesn't it make sense to let people exercise their freedom in a way that directs money to Florida's citizens? Wouldn't it be appropriate to set aside personal biases and approve a compact that will help pay to educate Florida's schoolchildren?

Approving the compact is but one example of elevating problem-solving over ideology. Another that immediately comes to mind is the federal stimulus package.

The federal stimulus package was enacted last year in the hope of jump-starting a national economy that was in the dire depths of recession. The stimulus package is frequently given a \$787-billion price tag, but you should know that almost \$300 billion of it was in the form of tax cuts to families and businesses.

The remaining money was apportioned to the states. A few governors may have rather loudly condemned the stimulus money, but that did not stop them from quietly accepting it.

Bear in mind that Floridians, who as a group represent a significant part of the American tax-paying public, will be paying for part of the stimulus package. It only follows that if we are paying for it, we should have the advantage of receiving it.

So, given our budget shortfalls - and given that Floridians were paying for part of the stimulus package, doesn't it make sense to spend our energies maximizing the benefit of that package? Isn't it our duty to advocate for Florida to receive its fair share? Isn't that more helpful to Floridians than engaging in hollow ideological posturing that achieves nothing?

This is what I mean by sticking to our core principles and not elevating ideology over real solutions.

My core principle is to not raise taxes. Although there were loud calls to broadly raise taxes and keep the budget funded at a higher level, with your help we chose instead to dramatically cut the budget and avoid devastating tax increases at a time when Floridians were already under enormous financial stress.

At the same time, the members of this legislature recognized the practical need for the stimulus money. And I thank you for it. While not particularly pleasant for any of us, this step was the responsible thing to do for our people. I commend you for your maturity and responsibility, and the people of Florida thank you today.

As we've learned from our own experience, when we focus on problem-solving, we achieve extraordinary results.

In December, we came together to create the opportunity for the construction of a 21st century rail system in Florida. This remarkable achievement will potentially create thousands of high-paying jobs and keep Florida competitive on the world stage. I appreciate your resolve and vision in making this a possibility for all Floridians. I want to also express my appreciation to Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos, the first woman to lead the Florida Department of Transportation.

During the last three years, my administration has focused on other economic development initiatives as well. In mid-2008, shortly after the recession began, I created Accelerate Florida to speed up over a billion dollars in direct expenditures for public sector projects.

Last week I had the privilege of breaking ground on one of those projects: I-595 Express improvements will relieve traffic congestion in South Florida. This \$1.2-billion project uses next-generation contracting that will move it from design to ribbon-cutting in four-and-a-half years, instead of 15. and it will create as many as 34,000 jobs in the region and boost our economy.

At the same time, I launched an initiative to cut red tape in government - and not burden businesses with unreasonable regulation. This action allows small businesses to grow faster and hire more employees.

With your help, during the first three years of my administration we made Florida a much safer place for our most vulnerable citizens. You enacted the Anti-Murder Act and improved the Jessica Lunsford Act, striking back at violent criminals and sexual predators of children.

Fellow Floridians, I am happy to report we are now seeing a decrease in violent crime. Thanks to the great work of state and local law enforcement and the crime solving tools of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, our citizens are better protected than ever before. Florida's new fingerprint identification system is improving our rate of solving cold cases by 300 percent, benefiting victims hurt by previously unsolved crimes.

Three years ago, Florida had an estimated 3.8 million residents living without health insurance. I proposed a market-based option of health insurance, called Cover Florida, for

these Floridians. This program is available to any Floridian, offering basic coverage for about \$150 a month. As with any private sector plan, more extensive coverage is available for higher premiums, but with so many lacking basic preventive care, Cover Florida remains a sound option for thousands of Floridians.

Since I became Governor, growth in KidCare enrollment has reduced the number of uninsured children by more than 20,000, while our Florida Discount Drug Card has saved almost 251,000 Floridians \$5.4 million on prescription drug costs.

Two years ago, I asked you to fund the next generation of mobile devices to revolutionize how we protect children in Florida's foster care system. At the time I noted we can track UPS packages better than we could these children.

Today, case workers responsible for the safety of more than 18,500 children in foster care have begun using mobile devices like this one to take pictures, record GPS coordinates and enter case information. These mobile devices will help 2,300 caseworkers spend more time with children and less time on paperwork.

Also with your help, there are more than TEN THOUSAND fewer children in state foster care than three years ago. Your willingness to fund my request for an Office of Chief Child Advocate has literally meant new lives for thousands of children. For the last two years, Florida has set records for the number of adoptions from state care.

Florida's children deserve every opportunity to succeed in life. For that reason, you passed and I signed legislation that provides early intervention for children with autism. Now, families dealing with autism have insurance coverage among large group carriers for important services such as speech therapy and essential screenings that can detect autism.

While we are doing a better job of ensuring the health and safety of our children, we must improve the background screenings of those who work with children, elders, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations. I ask you to join me in working on legislation that will ensure we verify those screening results before employees are authorized to go to work.

We have not lost sight of the fact that educating our schoolchildren is our most important investment in the future. We want to add to the accomplishments of Governor Bush and this administration by continuing to build the best public school system in America. Florida's students must be equipped to become the entrepreneurs, engineers, researchers and other highly skilled talent that will fuel our future innovation economy.

- Over the past four years, our schools have seen their rank move upward from 31st, to 14th, to 10th, and now 8th in America by Education Week's Quality Counts report.
- Florida leads the nation in high school graduates taking Advanced Placement exams and is ranked 5th in the percentage of students passing those exams.
- Our graduation rate is at the highest point ever.
- We have more "A" and "B" schools than ever since we began grading schools in 1999, despite tougher standards.

With us tonight is Jila Rezaie, principal of Miami Community Charter School. Under her leadership, Miami Community Charter went from being an "F" school to an "A" school in one year. Congratulations to you, the faculty, the students and their parents.

You have recognized our highest achieving teachers by making teacher bonuses a reality. We must further reward teachers of Advanced Placement programs by increasing their rewards for success. Your 2009-2010 budget, which I was pleased to sign, saved 20,000 teacher jobs. And this year, you have already begun to look at other common-sense ways to maintain our commitment to smaller class sizes.

But we must maintain our commitment to excellence in education by improving the teaching skills of our teachers and making our schools more accountable for student learning. We should also expand our Tax Credit Scholarships so that more low-income parents are empowered to send their children to the schools they choose.

These and other achievements have positioned us to succeed in the Race to the Top competition for millions of dollars in federal funds for Florida schools. We will know the results of our efforts very soon.

After slow progress for decades, my administration hit the fast-forward button on a plan to save the Everglades. The vision of a River of Grass that once again flows from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay is on the horizon. Long-requested federal dollars will finally complete the Tamiami Trail project, while the bold plan to purchase thousands of acres south of the Lake will help make this vision a reality. I thank Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mike Sole and his team, along with the South Florida Water Management District, for your efforts on this historic plan.

We have also preserved more than 638,000 acres of pristine land through our Florida Forever program since 2001.

To continue our progress, I am proposing \$50 million toward Everglades restoration and \$50 million to re-initiate Florida Forever. I ask the Legislature to fund these installments for Florida's future.

While we have accomplished many important tasks during these three years, there is still much work to do. My entire administration stands ready to work with you to address the many issues we will confront over the next 59 days. Yet, there are three issues of major importance that we must address: jobs and prosperity for Floridians; continued improvements to our schools, colleges, and universities; and re-instilling confidence in the integrity of our government and the public TRUST.

This session, and for the remainder of my term as Governor, my strongest focus will continue to be creating new and better jobs for Floridians. While corporate productivity seems to be growing, we still long for a corresponding increase in the number of job opportunities.

Your action today to delay a substantial increase in unemployment compensation tax is a tremendous help to businesses. To help even more, I ask you to create tax relief for families and businesses totaling at least \$100 million. This tax relief will help current and potential new businesses those with the sole ability to create jobs for our citizens. As part of this effort, I ask you to bring back the sales tax holiday for 10 days just before the new

school year. This step will put millions back into the pockets of Florida families. They will thank you - as will Florida business.

We can also help by slashing red tape. We can create a business-friendly, virtual one-stop shop where entrepreneurs and business owners can easily find the information they need to open and run a business. Business-friendly, potentially job-creating proposals are something government can do - and should do - to help jump-start our economy.

Florida's economy has long relied on the twin blessings of agriculture and tourism, bringing a combined economic impact of more than \$165 billion to our state. These industries have served our state and our people well, and we must ensure their continued success.

Yet, we must also build the next generation of Florida's economy. Innovation has built Florida's biotechnology business sector with almost 11 percent of all biotech companies in the United States. Yet, we must do more more innovation means more businesses and more jobs for Floridians. To achieve these goals, I ask you to invest \$125 million to attract and grow innovation companies and the jobs they bring, as well as \$10 million for shovel-ready projects in the rural areas of the state.

We can also strengthen our clean energy business sector by investing \$10 million for solar energy rebates, as well as injecting \$176 million in federal funding into our economy by expanding green energy technologies, including rebates for energy efficient appliances. The historic legislation passed two years ago is creating a new energy future for Florida, where we strive to become among the top two states in the nation in terms of solar energy. As the Sunshine State, we should expect nothing less.

2010 marks the 50th year of manned space flights leaving from Cape Canaveral. The shuttle fleet has almost completed its 30-year mission, leaving in question the future of nearly 7,000 Floridians affected by this change. These are truly the best and the brightest, and Florida would be ill-served if their many talents would leave the state.

I recently convened a Space Summit to chart a new course for Florida's aerospace industry. I would like to thank Representative Steve Crisafulli and Senator Thad Altman for sponsoring the Space Transition and Revitalization Act that will begin to marshal the resources needed to create jobs for the talented professionals affected by the federal government's disappointing change of direction. I also call on you to invest \$32.6 million toward the next generation of space exploration missions.

Florida is once again leading the way, and to keep the momentum moving forward, I will meet with Florida's Congressional delegation and other national leaders in Washington, D.C., later this month to explain the benefits of their continued investment in Florida as the gateway to space. This is something we must do.

At the same time, we should also invest \$100 million in our state universities as a down payment to increase degree production in science, technology, engineering, math and medicine and strengthen Florida's future workforce. Community and state colleges have been the work-horses of our efforts to provide access to higher education across Florida. We should invest \$67 million to help offset the tremendous enrollment growth in these programs over the past several years.

And finally, I will keep a strong focus during this session on fighting public corruption.

I have proposed measures for at least one very important public agency, the Public Service Commission, that creates more transparency and fairness in their deliberations. I believe the Commissioners should function more like judges, and we can achieve this by making sure all communication Commissioners have with those they regulate is open and transparent - and includes the public's representative who is charged with looking out for consumers.

I have also been concerned that, since becoming Governor, I have had to suspend or remove 35 public officials from office. Last fall, I asked the Florida Supreme Court to impanel a statewide grand jury, and I am grateful they have granted that request. My final request of these distinguished jurists is a timeline for the grand jury that will enable us to enact legislation that will hold public officials to a higher ethical standard and help restore the public's trust in their elected leaders.

In closing, I simply remind you: This year, more than others, our achievements will be measured - not by the passion of our rhetoric - but by our ability to be problem solvers and guide the ship of our state through the economic storm we are facing. I have absolute confidence in the wisdom of the House and Senate, in each of you here today. I love Florida - as I know you do - and together we can do great things for our people.

I commit to you my energy and efforts in this endeavor. It is my loss that I will not serve again with you during a legislative session, but it has been my greatest gain to have served with you at all.

When I imagine Florida's future, I cannot help but see past the current troubles to the bright future that awaits us. I ask you to focus your sights there as well.

Understand that a bountiful harvest will abound from the seeds we plant today.

When the story of this legislative session is written, I am confident it will be viewed as a unique time in Florida's history when we set aside our minor differences to unite behind the much greater purpose placed before us. That is the imperative of this legislative session, and one that I know we will fulfill. And when we do, make no mistake, we can enjoy the greatest compliment of all: In a history yet to be written, we will be known as good captains in the fury of this storm.

Thank you very much. God bless each of you, and God bless Florida.