

Following recognition of his family, dignitaries and special guests, President Simpson offered the following remarks, as prepared for delivery:

It's great to see all the Senate children and grandchildren here today. Every child is precious, especially our own, but there's something very special about grandchildren. They give us a sense of mortality because their lives begin when we're at the top of the hill.

To be clear, I said at the top of the hill, not over the hill.

They also give us an understanding of immortality. In them we realize that our purpose and influence extend well beyond our years of service. My grandchildren have also lit a fire of urgency in me to do all I can to provide them with a solid foundation for their futures.

To me, that's the true measure of success. Not just taking care of today, but also focusing on tomorrow and the world we will leave to future generations. Last year, I talked a lot about sowing and reaping: The basic law of farming. I had high hopes we would pass laws and make investments that would endure beyond our years in Tallahassee.

Thanks to your hard work and great partnerships with Speaker Sprowls, the House, and Governor DeSantis, we did accomplish some great things.

First and foremost, we kept Florida open and free. Faced with tremendous pressure and criticism at every step of the way, we held the line. We showed the nation that the free state of Florida respects the dignity of work. We showed that you can operate in a pandemic with facts based on science not political agendas. We helped educate people to make choices, focusing on protecting the most vulnerable and providing options for those who were sick without shutting down the entire state.

We kept our schools open. We affirmed the right, and the responsibility, of parents to direct the upbringing, education, and health care of their children. We invested record funding in education, with the highest per-pupil funding ever. We continued to increase teacher salaries to attract and keep great teachers in this noble profession. We expanded School Choice. One of the cornerstones to breaking generational poverty is to ensure that we have a strong school choice options so that parents can direct their children's education.

I am proud to say that Florida continues to lead the nation in school choice. 1 out of every 4 children in America that is enrolled in a school choice program lives right here in Florida. We are the promise-land for education-minded families.

And Senators, I am especially proud that we continued to prioritize students with unique abilities, children from low-income families, children in foster care, children from military families, and siblings of children already in these scholarship programs.

You've heard me say, "A rising tide lifts all boats." School choice is the tide that allows every single child, regardless of where they come from, to rise.

We invested in our state infrastructure. We established a three-part statewide infrastructure plan for affordable housing, mitigating the impacts of sea level rise, and enhancing wastewater programs, including septic-to-sewer conversions. Floridians have been waiting a long time for a comprehensive policy and a predictable budget plan to address these three critical areas.

We used over \$2 billion dollars in our one-time federal assistance to invest in building and repairing our roadways, putting Floridians to work and keeping commerce thriving. And by the way, using fiscal discipline by investing these one-time dollars in one-time projects is going to keep our economy balanced and healthy for generations to come.

We worked to mitigate supply chain issues in Florida, created by lockdown states and foreign bad actors, by focusing on our Florida ports. I'm proud we made a significant investment last year. But it was not just last year. I am proud that we have invested over a billion-dollars since I have been in the Senate.

These are visionary seeds sown in the past which increase our harvest today.

And speaking of visionary, five years ago, we removed the sales tax on manufacturing equipment. America needs to bring manufacturing jobs back, and let me be clear: Florida is open for business.

We've got a job for anyone who wants one, and it is showing up in the national monthly job reports. Florida is leading the country thanks to the Legislature's long-term vision.

For generations, Florida's environment has been one of the main attractions to new residents, businesses, retirees, and visitors to our great state.

Investing in our environment is also an investment in infrastructure, but more than that, it is an investment in the quality of life for future generations.

We preserved and expanded Florida's Wildlife Corridor to maintain more of Florida's unique natural habitats. Equally important, Wildlife Corridors create and protect our critical aquifer recharge area. We invested in Northern Storage ASR wells to increase our clean, sustainable water supply. Northern Storage will ensure that we have additional clean water supply during times of drought. It also reduces east/west lake releases on the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers. By capturing water in the north, we remove 80% of the nutrient load before it even gets to the Lake. In short, northern storage ensures all of our other Everglades restoration projects can work as they were designed.

We also invested in septic to sewer conversions to mitigate existing pollution and prevent future water pollution. Experts say that the majority of our current nutrient load in and around the Everglades and our spring sheds comes from septic tanks, so these conversions get to the actual root cause of the problem.

We recognized and elevated flood mitigation and sea level rise as a critical part of Florida's public safety infrastructure. By doing so, we will protect the trillions of dollars in personal

property and public infrastructure, and most importantly the quality of life for millions of Floridians.

Senators, we accomplished this and much more, all during a worldwide pandemic.

Now more than ever, we understand that leadership matters, and under the leadership of this Legislature and this Governor, Florida continues to be a refuge for freedom, a destination for millions, and a slice of paradise for those who want to work, raise their families, and succeed without the heavy hand of government telling them how to live.

But with all the great things happening in this state, there is always a need to innovate, and improve.

My work in farming and business taught me a long time ago that success has almost nothing to do with government and everything to do with hard-working people.

Most of the time, the best way government can help is to stay out of the way.

It always helps by honoring our freedoms and by focusing on the core mission of a solid infrastructure, strong public safety and education opportunities enjoyed by everyone.

We also have to recognize that government can be hurtful, with mandates, lockdowns, edicts, and regulations that deprive good people of the ability to work and provide for themselves and their families.

Every Legislature, every year, has another chance to make choices about what kind of government Florida is going to have. This Session we have another chance to sow the seeds that will grow our tomorrow.

Some of our endeavors will be those that voters required of us, like our annual balanced budget, and redistricting. I know this Senate will accomplish both of these tasks with products that we, and all Floridians, can be proud of.

In addition to our constitutional assignments, we have choices to make about how we will conduct ourselves this Session.

Working together, I believe we should take the same approach as we did last year.

Because of past choices, Floridians have continued to prosper and entrepreneurs are creating and growing new businesses across our state.

Our economy is flourishing and as a result, our state has the resources to add to last years' investments in our children, our natural resources, and our infrastructure.

We will continue to invest in expanding Florida's Wildlife Corridors, and Northern Storage ASR Wells.

We will continue to invest in our roadways and seaports.

We will further enhance the minimum wage for state workers and those who contract to perform critical services.

We will provide higher wages for law enforcement and corrections officers.

And we are also going to make sure that increases are prioritized for bus drivers, maintenance workers, cafeteria workers, and other true public servants in our public schools.

Senators, you all know how important it is to me that we continue our work to improve Florida's Child Welfare System.

Costs of early childhood care are consistently identified as one of the biggest barriers for would-be foster families. We need to address the gap between what the Early Learning Coalition voucher pays and the actual cost of care.

Also, if a relative takes on the responsibility of child-rearing, they ought to receive the same support from the state as a foster family. The difference right now is about \$200 a month per child.

Similarly, the college tuition waiver has been an important tool for youth aging out of foster care.

We need to make sure more children raised by their foster relatives have access to this important tool.

These are modest investments for the state, but could mean all the difference for a family member or foster parent facing the prospect of taking in a vulnerable child.

I'll be the first to say government can never replace the role of a safe, loving family. But we can, and we will continue to make foster children a priority by identifying and supporting caring families for them.

The earlier in life we can give a child a safe, permanent home, the better opportunities that child will have for the rest of their lives.

Finally, I want local governments to know that we have heard your concerns about preemption bills.

I will keep a sharp eye out for legislation that would limit your ability to pass local ordinances.

At the same time, we are going to make sure that local citizens and businesses understand the impact of your regulations by requiring you to provide fiscal impact statements for your ordinances and referendums.

We will also ensure that you pay legitimate businesses that are impacted by your takings.

It's been said that "with great power comes great responsibility."

We want to ensure that local governments are exercising one with the other.

Senators, I look forward to the work ahead this Session.

Over the last two years, Floridians have watched the freedoms of our friends and relatives in other states get stripped away one at a time. Florida is different. Florida is special.

And if we work together, we can keep Florida a beacon of hope, opportunity and freedom for generations to come. Thank you.