



THE FLORIDA SENATE
SENATOR BEN ALBRITTON
President

For Immediate Release
January 14, 2026

Contact: Katie Betta
(850) 487-5229

Rural Renaissance Legislation Unanimously Passes Florida Senate

*Opportunities for infrastructure improvements, education enhancements in rural communities
Complements \$1 billion for rural health care through President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill*

Tallahassee—The Florida Senate today passed Senate Bill (SB) 250, Rural Communities, by Senator Corey Simon (R-Tallahassee) a comprehensive package of legislative proposals designed to create a modern-day renaissance in rural communities across Florida. The bill creates opportunities for rural communities to expand education offerings, improve housing infrastructure, and modernize commerce. SB 250 also invests in farm-to-market roads to support Florida's vital agricultural supply chain.

"As we celebrate America's 250th Anniversary, there is no better time to celebrate and renew our focus on heritage farming communities across our state and nation. The hard work and patriotism of small family farm communities not only helped win our independence but also created and maintained a robust agricultural supply chain vital to our national security. It's a time-honored way of life worth preserving," said Senate President Ben Albritton (R-Wauchula). "With the support of Secretary Rollins and the USDA, we look forward to continued work with the Trump Administration to make Florida's Rural Renaissance a national model for rural prosperity whereby local communities across the nation can grow and prosper as they see fit."

"Technology has drastically expanded the possibilities available within our growing economy. With the ability to work anywhere, more and more people are seeking out the time-honored way of life rural communities provide, while legacy residents who have lived in these communities for generations are excited for new opportunities that improve access to education and health care," said Senator Simon who represents 12 rural counties across Florida's Panhandle and Big Bend. "With the investments Rural Renaissance is making in our transportation and public service infrastructure, combined with an over \$1 billion investment in rural health care made possible by President Trump, rural communities have an unprecedented opportunity to increase quality of life for generations to come."

Key pieces of the Senate's Rural Renaissance legislation designed to expand access to health care in rural communities will be implemented through a more than \$1 billion federal grant made available by President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill. To avoid duplicative funding, provisions covered by federal funds were removed from SB 250 today on the Senate floor.

SB 250 – FLORIDA’S RURAL RENAISSANCE

Increases Support and Partnerships with Rural Communities

Modernizes Support for Fiscally-Constrained Counties to Account for Inflation

Many communities are growing out of the current definitions in Florida law for fiscally constrained counties (FCC), either due to population increases or increases in the amount of property taxes raised. The bill modernizes these definitions by increasing the FCC threshold (set in 2006) from a county that raises \$5 million in property tax revenue per 1 mil, to \$10 million per 1 mil.

Creates the Office of Rural Prosperity

The bill creates the Office of Rural Prosperity at the Department of Commerce to provide technical assistance to rural communities. The Office will promote and facilitate statewide planning assistance for local governments, serving as a robust resource for rural local governments with dedicated regional staff. Personnel will be permanently assigned to regional rural community liaison centers across the state to engage with locals and facilitate access to resources. The bill also modernizes the existing Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) statute and rural local government strategy.

Establishes Renaissance Grants for Counties with Declining Population

A subset of our rural communities has lost population over the last decade (Gadsden, Hardee, Hamilton, Taylor, Jackson, Calhoun, and Liberty Counties). The bill creates a \$1 million block grant for each of the seven counties with declining population. Each county must develop a plan to use the funds with the goal of population growth. Use of these funds will be audited. The grant will be awarded annually until the county sees three consecutive years of population growth.

Funds for Rural Public Infrastructure Innovations

To facilitate the use of innovative, cost-saving technologies that will help rural governments save time and money, the bill creates a competitive application process for organizations with at least three years of experience in bringing innovations to local communities. Funds will help rural governments test and use new technologies.

Enhances Rural Economic Development Initiatives

Local or regional economic development community partners in rural communities can apply for grants to help cover the cost of site preparation, marketing, and training opportunities to further economic development initiatives. Further, by working with the Office and updating REDI functions, attention to rural areas will increase the likelihood that goals are maximized and successful.

Adds Small Business Development Center Circuit Riders

Growing small businesses fosters a sense of community and attracts people and commerce to the community as it grows. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) currently funds staff in rural areas to "ride the circuit" of their region and work with local governments and

communities to bring services, including access to capital, technical assistance, and other small business services. SDBC is a federal program that utilizes federal funding and matching funds from local state college partners. The bill appropriates \$1 million to increase circuit riders and reach more communities through this program.

Maximizes Options for Rural Housing

Raises Minimum Allocations for SHIP to Jump Start Rural Housing Options

Currently allocations are population-based, with the minimum allocation for each county within the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program set at \$350,000. The bill increases the minimum allocation for each county to \$1 million, providing additional funding to rural communities.

Preserves Rental Housing in Rural Communities

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently offers more than 14,000 subsidized rental units across more than 300 properties in the state, the vast majority of which are located in rural areas. USDA-financed properties are approaching the end of their use restrictions and are at risk of becoming market-rate rental housing. To preserve these units as affordable rentals, the bill appropriates funds for rehabilitation or acquisition for owners who agree to maintain the properties as affordable housing.

Enhances Rural Transportation and Broadband Infrastructure

Expands Rural Infrastructure Fund

The Rural Infrastructure Fund (RIF) facilitates planning, preparing, and financing of infrastructure projects in rural communities to encourage job creation and capital investment in rural economies. Rural communities can use RIF funds as a match for other infrastructure funding programs. Currently, the program is appropriated a minimum of \$5 million annually. The bill increases the recurring appropriation to \$10 million, with an additional one-time infusion of \$40 million.

Increases Rural Revolving Loan Program Funding

The Rural Revolving Loan Program was created by the Legislature in 1996 to facilitate the use of existing federal, state, and local financial resources by providing local governments with access to funds to promote the economic viability of rural communities. The program is intended to be highly flexible, and loan amounts vary depending on applicant needs. Currently, the program receives \$420,000 annually. The bill increases recurring funding to a total of \$1.4 million, with an additional one-time infusion of \$4 million. Because these are loans, these funds will be leveraged by rural communities many times.

Improves Coordination for Federal Broadband Programs

Broadband access has become a critical quality of life issue, with high-speed internet serving as a gateway to commerce, education, and health care. Florida has access to \$1.2 billion in federal funding through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, in addition

to other federal funds allocated to broadband, including \$366 million from the federal Capital Project Fund and \$400 million in pandemic funds appropriated by the Legislature to the Broadband Opportunity Program. The bill improves coordination and technical assistance between the Office of Broadband at the Department of Commerce and rural or underserved communities in need of broadband services.

Historic Commitment to Farm to Market Roads

The bill creates the Florida Arterial Road Modernization (FARM) Program, amending existing statutes for arterial rural highway projects to incorporate funding for roads used primarily as farm-to-market connections between rural agricultural areas and market distribution centers.

The bill creates a new distribution specifically for arterial roads from existing documentary stamp revenues by redirecting \$30 million from unallocated funds collected through Documentary Stamps to the State Transportation Trust Fund (STTF). With existing funding of \$20 million annually, this results in a \$50 million annual investment in arterial roads.

Expands Small County Road Assistance Program

The Small County Road Assistance Program (SCRAP) assists small county governments in resurfacing and reconstructing county roads. The bill redirects a portion of vehicle title fees, currently directed to the state's general revenue fund, to the STTF to increase funding available for the program. The Department of Transportation (DOT) is currently required to expend \$25 million on the program, and this redirect doubles the state's investment in these counties.

Creates Rural Transit Block Grant Program

The bill creates a new rural transit operating block grant program. This program is similar to the existing public transit block grant program; however rural transit operating block grants are only available to providers not eligible to receive funding under to the existing public transit block grant program. The FDOT must annually allocate at least \$3 million from the State Transportation Trust Fund for this program. Each eligible provider must annually receive at least \$20,000 in grant funds. Grant funds are distributed pursuant to a formula based on county population, revenue miles, and passenger data of eligible providers.

Improves Education Opportunities in Rural Communities

Expands Regional Education Consortia

Current education regional consortium service organizations include the Northeast Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC); Panhandle Area Educational Consortium (PAEC); and Heartland Educational Consortium (HEC), which serve small, rural school districts to reduce overhead administrative costs, minimize duplication of services, promote new programs, and provide personnel and programmatic support.

School districts with 20,000 or fewer students, lab schools, and the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind may enter into cooperative agreements to form a regional consortium service organization. Each regional consortium receives a \$50,000 grant per school district and eligible

member, to be used for the delivery of services within the participating school districts. The consortium board of directors, composed of the superintendents of the participating school districts, determines the services and use of funds. The bill increases the consortia funding per eligible member from \$50,000 to \$150,000 and appropriates recurring funding for this investment.

Creates Regional Consortium Service Organization Supplemental Services Program

The bill creates a grant program administered by the three regional consortium service organizations to supplement member needs related to transportation; district finance personnel services; property insurance; cybersecurity support; school safety; college, career, and workforce development; academic support; and behavior support within exceptional student education services.

Updates Special Facility Construction Account

The Special Facility Construction Account (SFCA) provides construction funds to school districts that have urgent construction needs but lack sufficient resources and have no reasonable expectation of raising needed funds over the next three years through tax revenue. Typically, the projects that receive funds through the SFCA are located in rural areas with insufficient tax base to fund large construction projects.

A school district receiving funding must levy the maximum discretionary millage (1.5 mills) for three years before making a request and until project completion. Of that levy, the school district must pay the value of 1 mill per year to the project. These funds are collected by the Department of Education, leaving participating districts with limited ability to pay for other fixed capital outlay needs. The bill authorizes a school district that receives funds through the SFCA to retain its entire 1.5 mill discretionary ad valorem levy.

Adds a Student Loan Repayment Program for Rural Educators

The bill creates the Rural Incentive for Professional Educators (RIPE) program to help small counties attract and retain instructional personnel and administrators. The program provides an annual benefit for educators who reside in and work as instructional employees or administrators at public or private schools in a fiscally constrained county.

Participants receive up to \$15,000 in total student loan repayment assistance over five years, disbursed in annual payments not to exceed \$3,000 per year.

Expands Access to Health Care in Rural Florida

Increases Existing Medicaid Payments for Rural Hospitals

In Florida, five rural hospitals have closed, primarily due to financial challenges. A "critical access hospital" (CAH) must be located in a rural area and outside a certain distance from other hospitals. Federal Medicare recognizes this distinction and provides higher payments for Medicare services provided at these hospitals. However, Florida Medicaid reimbursement does not recognize CAH status.

The bill appropriates additional funding to enhance Medicaid payments to reimburse rural hospitals that provide care for the current Medicaid population, similar to Medicare reimbursement.

Expands Florida Reimbursement Assistance for Medical Education Program (FRAME)

The FRAME program offers student loan reimbursement to various health care practitioners to offset their loans and educational expenses to entice them to practice in underserved locations where there are practitioner shortages. SB 250 allows doctors who are board certified in emergency medicine and employed or under contract with a rural hospital or a rural emergency hospital to participate in the FRAME program.

One Big Beautiful Bill – Rural Health Transformation Program

Programs formerly in Rural Renaissance, now available via a \$209.9 million annual grant (more than \$1 billion over 5 years) made available through the Florida Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP) created in the federal Big Beautiful Bill of 2025.

Growing Doctors and Nurses in Rural Areas

Rural communities in Florida have limited access to medical care. As a result, these communities are home to more people with medically complex needs, which, if addressed through preventative and primary care, could significantly improve quality of life and reduce costs for families. Physicians, physician assistants and autonomous APRNs might be more willing to relocate to rural areas with grant funding to establish primary care practices.

The RHTP provides start-up funding for established physician and dental practices to expand into rural areas. Also includes APRN and PA-led practices, within their scope of practice. Funding is dedicated to primary care, dental, chronic disease management, OB/GYN, and mental health services. The goal is to open at least 30 new or satellite rural providers by 2031.

The Program creates the Clinical Training Investment Opportunity initiative to focus on rural workforce and practice expansion to build and retain a strong, sustainable rural health workforce. This initiative builds on the TEACH clinical program created through the Senate's Live Healthy legislation, spearheaded by former Senate President Kathleen Passidomo (R-Naples). The initiative provides clinical training and supports rural rotations and preceptorships for a broad workforce, including medical students, nursing students, behavioral health trainees, community health workers, and emergency medical services. Funding is available for clinical training programs, supervised rotations, and practitioner recruitment and retention efforts as well as provides housing assistance for trainees in rural areas. The goal is to place 150 trainees in rural rotations by 2030 and to improve primary care provider availability from 40 to 46 practitioners per 100,000 residents.

Advanced Training for Rural Emergency First Responders

Stroke, Cardiac, and Obstetrics patients in rural Florida face challenges including limited access to hospitals, fewer resources, and a lack of advanced treatments. These challenges can lead to worse health outcomes and higher mortality rates.

The RHTP connects rural emergency rooms instantly to stroke specialists via telehealth using electronically transmitted CT scans and other telehealth technologies. The program also delivers in-home stabilization, education, and follow-up care to rural residents after emergency department or hospital discharge with EMS certified personnel. The program also enables rural hospitals to connect with remote critical care physicians and nurses who monitor patients 24/7 using advanced technology. This allows seriously ill patients to receive high-level care closer to home, reduces unnecessary transfers, and keeps families together. The goal is to connect 15 rural hospitals to eICU networks by 2030.

Deploying Additional Mobile Units and Telemedicine Kiosks

The RHTP includes funding for mobile units to provide preventative, screening, rehabilitation, and prenatal services in rural areas. The goal is to deploy 25 mobile health units to rural areas by 2030. The grant also allows rural hospitals and clinics to host virtual specialty clinics for patients to consult with off-site specialists through telehealth. The goal is to launch 50 virtual specialty clinic sites by 2031.

The RHTP provides reimbursement to rural pharmacies for basic medical care for non-life-threatening illnesses and preventative services. Clinics may also offer services through diagnostic telehealth kiosks, which allow patients to connect in real time with licensed clinicians for assessment, triage, and treatment. The goal is to leverage existing pharmacy infrastructure to address gaps in care and reduce emergency room visits.

The program also establishes regional centers that connect rural residents to same-day behavioral health assessments, tele-psychiatry visits, and coordinated follow-up care. The initiative supports primary care providers through a Collaborative Care Model, where psychiatrists and behavioral health specialists work alongside local clinicians to guide treatment plans and medication management. This approach ensures that patients receive timely, coordinated mental health care close to home, reducing travel barriers, wait times, and emergency visits.

Total Rural Renaissance Appropriations (with Health Care provisions removed) – \$151.85 million

- Renaissance Grants – \$7 million
- Office of Rural Prosperity – \$2.4 million
- Preserving Rental Housing in Rural Communities – \$30 million
- Rural Strategy Grants – \$250,000
- Rural Infrastructure Fund – \$50 million (inclusive of base funding)
- Rural Revolving Loan Program – \$5.4 million (inclusive of base funding)
- Innovations for Rural Counties – \$500,000

- Small Business Development Center Network – \$1 million
- Student Loan Repayment for Rural Educators – \$7 million
- Regional Education Consortia – Increase from \$50,000 to \$150,000 per district – \$5.4 million
- Regional Education Consortia Grants – \$25 million
- Rural Hospital Medicaid Enhancement – \$7.9 million state, \$10 million federal (additional funds, based on most recent estimate)

General Revenue Redirects in the Bill

- Fiscally Constrained Counties – approximately \$50.3 million (based on most recent estimate)
- Direct-to-Home Satellite Tax – approximately \$10.2 million
- Farm-to-Market Roads – \$50 million State Transportation Trust Fund
- Small County Road Assistance Program – approximately \$48.4 million State Transportation Trust Fund (based on most recent estimate)

Additional Funding for the General Appropriations Act

- State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program – \$18.8 million

For more information, please visit www.FLSenate.gov.

###