

Legislative UPDATE

By Lori Fayhee

As we approached the final Committee Week before the 2018 Legislative Session, I had the pleasure of attending the Chamber of Southwest Florida's Pre-legislative Delegation Luncheon featuring State Senators Benacquisto and Passidomo, and State Representatives Caldwell, Eagle, Fitzenhagen, and Rodrigues, speaking on the upcoming legislative session.

Rep. Ray Rodrigues stated that the House is working on the \$83 billion budget, with a surplus of only \$54 million. He believes that balancing the budget and hurricane recovery will hold the most attention in the upcoming session. In

response to a question regarding sexual harassment in Tallahassee, Rep Rodrigues said that under existing law, employees are protected. "The question is: Will employees feel confident enough in the system, to step up and come forward when it happens?" "Two senators - Benaquistto and Book, who've both been victims of sexual assault, did one of the greatest things we've seen in legislature and said they would support, when report first came out that six women said they had been victims but chose to remain anonymous, 'you need to believe in the process and to know that you are not alone, and we will be with you if you come forward.' That will do more to change the culture than anything else we will do. We need more of that and less of the bad behavior."

Rep. Fitzenhagen said she is supporting all the priorities of the House of Representatives and working to increase the ability for businesses to operate without any barriers. She stated, "We are always trying to find ways to eliminate regulation and have a better way for people to enter a business." To that end, she is working on a bill called the Franchisee Security Act. She stated that if local businesses are involved in a dispute, they have a choice of law clauses and they have to work out their differences in a court of law in another state, often California, and then they have to apply the law in another state, often New York. She stated, "If you want to do business in the state of Florida, I believe you should be able to count on the laws of Florida applying to your small business, and the courts of Florida settling your dispute." She has also filed a Financial Literacy Bill, again this year, that would provide tools for students graduating from high school. In conclusion, Rep. Fitzenhagen applauded Senator Benacquisto for addressing addiction and the mental health crisis, stating that we "don't have enough funding for mental health. Please share that with everyone you know. We need more funding in Florida for mental health."

Sen. Passidomo shared that Senate President Negron called her in August to assign her to the K-12 Appropriations Committee. She stated that "the K-12 appropriations budget is the biggest budget silo in the state of Florida, and that the total education budget has now passed healthcare as the biggest funding driver." Among her priorities, are the huge crisis and mental health problem in our schools. "Two hundred kids were Baker Acted in Broward County alone last year. The amount of suicide is just astounding among kids." She believes that we have not been able to give school districts the tools to address those issues and she would like to increase the focus on that. Sen. Passidomo has filed Senate Bill 874 to require that legislature may not sweep the Sadowski Trust Funds, the affordable housing Trust funds, into the general budget. This would stop the sweeps of the State and Local Housing Trust Fund, which are funded through documentary tax stamps. She stated that "Every year for the last 10-15 years The legislature has swept those funds into the general fund to help out the budget." "So we don't have available funding for affordable housing" and "SWFL is drowning in lack of affordable housing."

According to Sen. Passidomo's November press release, "The Governor's '17-18 budget proposed a \$224M sweep, while the '18-19 budget proposes a much lower \$91.8M sweep, affirming the Governor's commitment to affordable housing in the wake of a disastrous hurricane season." "This year marks 25 years since the Sadowski Act became law. There were no sweeps of the housing trust funds during the first ten years."

Sen. Benacquisto is working on two bills this session. S140 would remove the opportunity for people to prey on children across the state of Florida by raising the legal age of marriage to eighteen. The other bill is to limit prescription drug supply of opioids to three day prescriptions, and up to a seven day prescription if deemed medically necessary to treat the patient's pain as an acute medical condition. She stated that "this bill does not address chronic pain - only acute pain. Those with chronic pain could still receive a longer prescription." Senator Benacquisto shared that she "truly appreciates all of you who come to Tallahassee, and asks that you, please continue to come and call on us. Your advocacy is very valuable."

Rep. Caldwell said that he is on his 'farewell tour' and in his final year in the House. He shared that, "We really have been blessed with those who have served. We have the Majority Leader, two Chairmen, the Rules Chair, Majority Whip in the House; I have full chairmanship and Four subcommittees." He stated that he worked on permanent dedicated funding of land conservation last year, reshaping Florida Forever, and will continue this year.

Rep. Eagle serves as majority whip in the majority office and makes a great team with Rep. Rodrigues. He shared that they work with every member on every issue. Rep. Eagle filed two bills this year and may file *Continued on the next page...*

The background of the entire page is a stylized American flag. The top portion features a field of white stars on a blue background, while the lower portion consists of red and white vertical stripes. The flag appears to be waving, with the stripes curving upwards from the bottom left towards the right.

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one more. On welfare reform, he said, "We always want to help people be productive and support their family." The welfare reform bill would require the government also to remove those who abuse the system. He has also filed a Gun Bill, to address the current law that prosecutes a concealed weapon holder who accidentally flashes their weapon, to lower the violation from a misdemeanor to a citation. Currently he is working with the Hurricane committee to help homesteaded homes with damage (uninhabitable) to receive property tax relief and is hoping to file a bill to address this. He applauded Lee County hurricane recovery, saying they "did a wonderful job preparing the community and helping with recovery afterward." He shared that while Fema and flood maps are a federal issue, in the long term, we need to redraw these maps, as many flooded areas were not listed in flood zones.

Rep. Eagle concluded by thanking the legislators' staff and reminding us how heavily they depend on their staff and that 'they are here to serve you.' "They (staff) keep us on task and keep our legislation moving and serve the community. They are here to help you with your needs."

Rep. Caldwell's Legislative Assistant is Charlotte Codie, and his District Secretary is Priscilla Skupny. Rep. Eagle's Legislative Assistant is Paige LeBoutillier, and his District Secretary is Kathleen (Katie) Larsen. Rep. Fitzenhagen's Legislative Assistant is Charles P. Smith, and her District Secretary is Melissa Thompson. Rep. Rodrigues' Legislative Assistant is James Mullen, and his District Secretary is Leilani Gonzalez. Sen. Benacquisto's Legislative Assistants are Matthew Hunter and Timothy Morris, and her Secretary is Alexis Mansolo. Sen. Passidomo's Naples Legislative Assistants are Rebecca Kokkinos and Sandra Mummert, LaBelle Legislative Assistant is Trenton Muntz, and her Tallahassee Legislative Assistant is Jared Willis.