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## With session looming, Scott looks to reshape state

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TALLAHASSEE — Rick Scott is on a mission to boost Florida's economy by reshaping state government.

But his strategy — dramatically reducing government power, cutting taxes and giving business freer rein — promises to fundamentally alter state government and the services it provides to 18 million residents, from public school spending to aid for the state's most vulnerable residents, including children and the elderly.

Although not all his proposals will pass, Scott has shifted the debate sharply to the right. While some legislators may disagree with his methods, most share his goals, setting the stage for Florida to become a leading national lab for the latest conservative ideas on government size and scope.

The Legislature's 60-day session begins Tuesday. By the time it ends, the nearly 1 million people enrolled in the Florida Retirement System, including nearly 700,000 active employees, are likely to face reduced take-home pay, after an effort to force them to pay more for retirement and health care benefits.

Public school teachers will also likely have less job security, with future pay raises linked to students' performance on tests.

Other changes would:

nMake it harder for Floridians to seek unemployment compensation, including limiting how many weeks of benefits are available and giving businesses more power to contest claims.

nMove most of the nearly 3 million Floridians on Medicaid into managed care programs, including HMOs.

nEase restrictions on big developers seeking state approval. Some of the regulatory relief will come from abolishing the Department of Community Affairs, Florida's growth management agency.

nEliminate the corporate income tax paid mainly by large multi-state corporations doing business in Florida. The tax phase-out could cost the state more than \$2 billion over seven years.

nChange regulations to make it easier for insurers to raise rates that are already among the highest in the world. The changes could lead to even higher premiums in coastal counties and limit homeowners' ability to rely on the state-backed Citizens Property Insurance company.

nEliminate nearly 8,700 state jobs, plus thousands more in public schools.

nMake it harder for Floridians to sue businesses or health care providers when they

are injured in accidents or through negligence.

Expand the use of private companies to run state institutions such as prisons or mental health hospitals.

Florida's Legislature has been trending toward the conservative for years. But in the past, some of the more extreme proposals were checked by a populist governor, Charlie Crist, a moderate faction in the Senate and the Democrats.

Voters in November gave Republicans sizable majorities in the House (81-39) and the Senate (28-12), making it easy to roll over any Democratic opposition and even override any Scott vetoes they do not like.

Republicans essentially have the power Democrats held in Tallahassee through most of the 20th century. Lawmakers once considered moderates — and even some conservatives — have been sidelined.

Under Scott's campaign mantra of "let's get to work," the 58-year-old former health care executive has argued that slashing government spending and regulations will revitalize Florida's economy, in which more than 1 million Floridians are jobless.

"If we do the right thing, this is the model of what's going to happen in America," Scott told a recent Naples meeting sponsored by the Cato Institute, a conservative policy research group that advocates many of the ideas Scott will try in his first year as governor.

House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, and Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, are receptive to Scott's general policy moves — including cutting spending, keeping taxes low, revamping Medicaid and scaling back state pensions.

"On the major issues, I think all three of us are very well aligned," Haridopolos said.

But even some of Scott's supporters are concerned over his aggressive moves, particularly his plan to slash more than \$3 billion in state spending in one year.

Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan, a Republican who served on one of Scott's transition teams, said the governor is "getting less than stellar advice."

In a bluntly worded letter to the governor last week, Morgan said the deep cuts to critical services such as the Department of Children and Families and law enforcement agencies could result "in long-term devastating outcomes."

Among others, Morgan said the state's cuts may push many of the social and legal burdens to Florida's communities, which have their own budget problems.

"Reducing or cutting taxes is an excellent example," Morgan wrote. "Who argues against this? But when we reduce a budget for an agency (critical) in the protecting of children it is counter-productive and someone must (will) do it (county agencies)."

Morgan and other critics say Scott, a business executive who built his fortune by aggressively amassing the Columbia/HCA health care conglomerate, is trying to govern Florida like a "hostile corporate takeover."

Scott drew similar complaints when he unilaterally killed the \$2.7 billion high-speed rail project last month without first consulting legislative leaders.

"He's a wonderful man personally, a very nice humble man," said Senate Transportation Chairman Jack Latvala, R-Palm Harbor. "But he will learn that the Legislature has some responsibilities — that we are an equal branch of government. We're not a subservient branch of government."

Others are more critical.

"This is not a monarchy. He is not a king," said Sen. Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa, who led a bipartisan lawsuit challenging Scott's rail decision, saying he could not ignore prior legislative approval of a rail project.

Other Republican leaders say that despite some of his missteps in communication with lawmakers, Scott is fulfilling his campaign pledge to cut government spending and create jobs.

"What he is trying to do is be fiscally responsible to the taxpayers of the state. That's how he became governor," said Senate Rules Chairman John Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, a former state GOP chairman and House speaker.

But Scott's moves have also raised the political stakes for his conservative agenda. A top Scott aide told Senate leaders at a dinner at the governor's mansion that the "nation is watching" how lawmakers handle the governor's sweeping plan to cut state spending.

His stances have given Scott a national platform — with regular appearances on Fox, CNN and other major networks — and have drawn comparisons between him and other conservative state leaders, including Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin and Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey.

Some compare Scott's approach to the confrontational style of Gov. Claude Kirk in the 1960s. But Kirk was a Republican with a Democratic Legislature. The combination of Scott's ascent and the concentration of Republican power in the House and Senate set the state up for a session unlike any in decades, if ever.

"They're not go-along, get-along types of politicians," said Edmund Kallina, a historian at the University of Central Florida and the author of the book "Claude Kirk and the Politics of Confrontation."

"They have a vision," Kallina said about the two governors. "I think what happens with most politicians is that they try to articulate some sort of vision in their campaign but once they're in power they get caught up in the politics of accommodation. It was not that way with Kirk and it doesn't appear to be that way with Scott."

Kallina said Scott and Kirk each ran as an "outsider" and was a highly successful business executive who was "not inclined to having people tell him what to do."

Rep. Ron Saunders, D-Key West, leader of the House Democrats, said Scott's differences with Republican legislative leaders could make the session difficult for the new governor despite his philosophical agreement with the GOP lawmakers.

"Philosophy is one thing, but encroaching on someone else's authority or making recommendations that are not practically obtained may lead to not as much happening as people might presume," Saunders said.

Scott has said he expects to have a friendly relationship with lawmakers — many of whom he has already invited for dinners and other gatherings.

"I'm very comfortable that I'll have a very good working relationship with the House and Senate, because we all have the same agenda: Let's get the state back to work," he said.

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