

Gov. Rick Scott says needed changes, cuts will not make him 'most popular'

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TALLAHASSEE — In a state of the state speech that could at times pass as a sales pitch for Florida, Gov. Rick Scott called on Tuesday night for elected officials to make the state a place where business people will want to invest, and a model for the nation.

“Doing what must be done will not make me ‘most popular,’ but I’m determined to make Florida ‘most likely to succeed,’” Scott said.

On the same day that the 2011 Legislative session convened and statewide protests against his proposed budget cuts erupted, Scott, a Naples Republican, continued his calls for reining in spending, streamlining government, and doing away with “unreasonable regulations.”

Republicans hold veto-proof majorities in both the Florida House and Senate, so Scott’s wish-list may be more likely to pass than in years past. Ultimately it’s up to the Legislature to craft and pass laws.

A “vast majority” of legislators were elected on promises of smaller government and lower taxes, Scott said.

“Don’t blink,” he told them. “Don’t let special interests persuade you to turn your back on the people who elected you.”

With unemployment hovering near 12 percent, and more than 1 million Floridians out of work, the pressure is on Scott to make good on his campaign promise to create 700,000 new jobs in seven years.

In his half-hour speech, he said better times were ahead.

“I ask everyone to look beyond the short-term and imagine with me what Florida will be like once we turn our state around,” Scott said.

In a rebuttal, House Democratic Leader Ron Saunders said many members of his party agree that job creation is the No. 1 issue facing the state. It’s Scott’s methods — tax breaks for businesses, reducing school funding — they disagree with.

"The governor's budget uses a reverse Robin Hood approach," Saunders said. "It takes money from the poor and middle class and gives tax breaks to the rich and to large corporations."

Scott, who wore a blue suit and red-and-white tie, appeared excited, if not a little nervous, as he began his address. A Naples businessman who came out of nowhere to win election as Florida's 45th governor, Scott has never served in public office before.

Many of Southwest Florida's Republican delegates noted there was little they hadn't heard from Scott before.

"It was straight out of his playbook," said Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-Fort Myers. "What he said on Day One is what he'll say on Day 10. It's what he'll say on Day 60. He's got an ambitious agenda."

Still, they all said they liked what they heard.

"I think the governor did an excellent job of laying out his jobs agenda, his desire to create a Florida that is second to none in job creation and job expansion," said Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples.

At the beginning of the speech, Scott honored the six Florida law enforcement officers who have been killed in the line of duty this year.

He also honored four business leaders – including Reinhold Schmieding, president of Naples-based medical device manufacturer Arthrex, Inc. – who have either decided to move their business to, or expand their operations in Florida.

In an e-mail to Arthrex employees, Schmieding said Scott's speech was the first news of a 160,000 square foot expansion of the business in Southwest Florida. No specific details of the expansion were given.

"Our facility expansion plans should continue to sustain our target of 150 new jobs every year for the next five years for Arthrex," Schmieding said in the e-mail.

Scott continued calling for unemployment, lawsuit, and pension reform. In addition to calling for merit pay for teachers and an end to teacher tenure, both of which appear to be on the fast-track in the Legislature, Scott also called for increasing the number of charter schools in the Florida.

"The world is watching, and God is watching over us," Scott said. "Our success will be the model for the nation."

Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, said he was impressed with Scott's focus.

"I'm looking forward to the next 59 days," he said, referring to the two-month Legislative session.

Rep. Kathleen Passidomo said Scott appeared energized and enthusiastic.

"I think he basically asked for our cooperation and our help," she said. "I think he is honestly excited about the process."

The first day of the session started with ceremonies convening the House and Senate, and back-to-back speeches by Senate President Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, and House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park.

Calling forth Winston Churchill, 18th Century conservative British statesman Edmund Burke, and the New Testament in his speech, Haridopolos summed up his priorities as the two R's – restraint and reform.

"The troubles we face today are the programmatic remnants of a government that was too large, too complacent and too wasteful," Haridopolos said.

Cannon was critical of the "nationalization of state politics," and the broken politics of Washington D.C.

"Washington has become addicted to foreign debt," he said. "We are like a fiscal heroin addict and the Chinese government is their main supplier."

Outside, dueling rallies kicked off on either side of Monroe Street, in front of the Old Capitol. A few hundred tea party members and Scott supporters gathered in front of the Old Capitol.

A slightly smaller group of union members, students, supporters of state workers, and even the Socialist Workers Party protested Scott's proposed cuts during an Awake the State rally in front of the Leon County Courthouse.

Rob Wright, an environmental worker from Sarasota, traveled to Tallahassee to protest proposed cuts in education and services.

"If the cuts go through as they are now, people won't discover the lack of services for a couple of years," the 57-year-old Republican said. "By that time it's too late."

Scott addressed the tea party just after 1 p.m., telling them to "show up and let everybody ... know what you believe in."

"We heard there were going to be unions represented," said Carolyn Hunter-Haast, 61, who lives near Gainesville. "So we came to show our support for Rick Scott, for what he's doing for the state and for the people."

Coinciding with the start of the session, Tuesday was also Florida Forever Day at the Capitol. In his proposed budget, Scott called to zero-out funding for Florida Forever, the state's 10-year-old land acquisition and conservation program.

"We won't let it go away," said Laurie Macdonald, state director of Defenders of Wildlife. "It's too important to the people of the state."

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