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The Challenges Ahead

- Edited by: Brittany Ann Morrissey

Just a month into his term as Florida's top official, Governor Ron DeSantis seeks to make big changes, but how much of a grace period will constituents grant him before they start demanding results?



In January, with his left hand on the Bible, Ron DeSantis swore to support, protect and defend the state of Florida. In doing so, he officially became the Sunshine State's 46th governor. An inaugural speech followed, during which he quoted Founding Fathers Alexander Hamilton and Benjamin Franklin and compared himself to a boat, saying "I will not be a rudderless vessel in this endeavor."

DeSantis comes into office during positive times for Florida, economically speaking at least. He's admitted as much while praising former Gov. Rick Scott for his leadership in helping the state's economy recover from the Great Recession.

But outside of that, DeSantis is facing some pretty hefty challenges including conditions that have given Florida the fifth-highest rate of uninsured residents in the nation, an environmental crisis defined by toxic

blue-green algae spilling out of Lake Okeechobee and red tide flanking the state's coasts, and a public education system that is being upended by school choice.

Who is Ron DeSantis?

Throughout his campaign, DeSantis leaned heavily into aligning himself on political issues with President Donald Trump. He even went so far as to make a somewhat farcical ad where he repeats one of the president's favorite refrains (build the wall) and reads Trump's *The Art of the Deal* to his child. "Even though he ran as a Trump acolyte, he doesn't seem to have the same personality as Trump," Carol Weissert, a political science professor at Florida State University, says.

His reverence for the lawmaking process may be a result of DeSantis' government experience. After all, before he ran for governor, he represented Florida's 6th Congressional District (which encompasses parts of Jacksonville, Daytona and New Smyrna Beach) in the U.S. Congress for about five years.

Aubrey Jewett, a political science professor at the University of Central Florida, says the new governor's connection to Trump may be strategic, rather than an indication of how he'll govern.

"As with Gov. Rick Scott, who prided himself on having a pretty good relationship with Trump, I suspect that DeSantis will sometimes try to leverage his positive relationship with Donald Trump to the benefit of Florida," he says.

When it comes to whether he'll follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, DeSantis, a conservative Republican like Scott, has put forth much of the same in terms of the economy: low taxes and reducing regulatory burdens for businesses.

But there is at least one issue where the new governor is taking a bigger interest than the previous administration did.

"At least right out of the gate, [DeSantis] really does seem to be putting a lot more emphasis on the environment and particularly water quality issues than we've seen in the last eight years," Jewett says.

In fact, DeSantis has characterized himself akin to Teddy Roosevelt, a man who is often remembered for his environmental conservation work. Roosevelt was also an ardent trust buster.

"Teddy Roosevelt was very much against big business," Weissert says. "He sort of ran against some of the big corporations. I haven't seen that from DeSantis but it will be very interesting to see if that's the direction he goes."

DeSantis' age may also have some influence on how he governs. At 40 years old, he is the youngest governor Florida has had since Claude Kirk Jr., who was also 40 when he took office in 1967. In comparison, former Gov. Scott was 58 on his inauguration day.

"The generational thing will be kind of interesting to watch," Weissert says.

The Environment

Just 10 days into his term as governor, DeSantis issued an executive order calling for \$2.5 billion to put toward Everglades restoration and the protection of water resources. He also called for the creation of a blue-green algae task force and the appointment of a chief science officer.

Greg Knecht, deputy executive director for The Nature Conservancy in Florida, which has an office in Maitland, says he and the organization are inspired by the governor's focus on environmental causes.

"Certainly, the governor in his first couple days has demonstrated a desire to move environmental issues forward including the algae blooms, Everglades restoration and other water quality impacts," he says. "And so we're extremely encouraged at the governor's initial actions."

But although the governor seems to be motivated to tackle Florida's environmental issues, the road to clearer waters is long and the commitment the governor has made needs to be long-term.

"It isn't just something we can solve in one year," Knecht says. "These kinds of environmental problems didn't happen overnight and aren't going to be fixed overnight."

There are three main environmental crises facing the Sunshine State today that the governor says he wants to address: red tide affecting the coasts, pollution causing toxic algae blooms in Lake Okeechobee and the degradation of the Everglades.

William Mitsch, director of the Everglades Wetland Research Park, says all three issues are somewhat related, but the impetus is the contamination of Lake Okeechobee, the largest freshwater lake in Florida.

Years of runoff from farm fields and towns has caused the overdevelopment of toxic blue-green algae in the lake. To make matters worse, when the lake becomes too engorged, the lake water has to be pumped out to avoid breaching the Herbert Hoover Dike.

"They can't send it to the Everglades because it's polluted water," Mitsch says. "So, they send it to the coastlines and everybody on the coastlines gets angry as hell. So, it's a no-win situation."

It's the pumping of this polluted water out to sea that some scientists believe is making red tide occurrences worse.

Red tide is a natural, recurring phenomenon that happens when certain photosynthetic organisms found in the Gulf of Mexico swell in number. These organisms produce neurotoxins that when ingested by marine life cause massive die-offs and subsequently beaches full of dead fish and seabirds.

Although it's a natural process, the severity of this past year's occurrence of red tide has scientists and environmentalists concerned.

The Everglades are mixed up in this too. The wetlands suffer from water quality problems like Lake Okeechobee's and that is having a devastating effect on its ecosystem.

To combat these interrelated problems, the U.S. Congress created and enacted the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan that provides a framework for protecting and preserving water resources in central and south Florida. The plan was originally passed in 2000 but has been slow to be implemented.

Additionally, the Florida Legislature passed a bill to build a reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee in an effort to reduce harmful water discharges from the lake. The building of the reservoir will be funded by state and federal dollars.

Mitsch says he's concerned that the plan for the southern reservoir doesn't pay enough attention to improving water quality.

"I hope the governor will recognize that it's not a perfect plan yet and it needs some tweaking," he says.

And he also hopes the governor will take into account the testimony of non-bureaucrats.

"We need some leadership at the governor's level to know enough to ask scientists and engineers what's going on and what should happen," he says.

Education

DeSantis has said he supports school choice, the idea that students should be able to opt out of the school they are zoned to attend for options such as public charter schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are operated privately. Instead of being overseen by the elected offices of a county school board like traditional public schools are, oversight comes from a nonprofit board.

Ralph Arza, director of government relations for the Florida Charter School Alliance, says he's happy to hear the governor has taken this stance.

"No child should be condemned to attending a school that is not going to help them achieve their full potential," he says. "And there are schools in the state of Florida and teachers in the state of Florida that at times don't provide the best environment for children."

But some have questioned whether charter schools are really providing what they say.

Ben Wilcox, research director for the non-profit and nonpartisan research institute Integrity Florida, says he's concerned about the lack of oversight charter schools have from the government.

In late 2018, Integrity Florida issued an in-depth report on charter schools called "The Hidden Costs of Charter School Choice."

While charter schools in Florida are required to be run as nonprofits, many of these organizations contract for-profit management companies to build, supervise and operate their schools.

"In a lot of cases in the charter schools where we found problems, the [nonprofit] boards work in association with the management of the schools," Wilcox says. "So if there is financial mismanagement going on, it's unlikely that the board is going to do anything about it."

Wilcox says this is because the management companies look to serve their best interests, which sometimes comes at a cost to students' education and, ultimately, taxpayers.

"It's almost like a corporate scam that's at work," he says.

Arza agrees that there have been bad actors but overall he says most charter schools are doing a better job than traditional schools.

"Charter schools are more transparent [and] more efficient when it comes to taxpayer dollars than the traditional public schools are or will ever be," he says.

And, if a charter school is not living up to its promise, parents and students are free to leave, he says.

"When you agree to go to a charter school, you don't sign up for life," he says. "You know, you can sign up today and leave tomorrow if you're not happy."

DeSantis has indicated he believes this as well. When asked by the Tampa Bay Times about accountability for charter schools, he said people can vote with their feet.

He also nominated former Florida House Speaker Richard Corcoran, who has backed charter school legislation in the past, to the position of education commissioner.

Health Care

Health care was top of mind for voters leading up to gubernatorial election. And for good reason: Health care costs have continued to rise nation-wide, while in the Sunshine State, the number of uninsured residents increased from 2016 to 2017, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Joan Alker, executive director and research professor at the Center for Children and Families at Georgetown University, says the rising number of uninsured residents is a problem for everyone, not just those who lack protection.

"Having a large number of uninsured people ... puts the load on the health care system because there are uncompensated health care costs that get shifted to everybody including most employer-sponsored health insurance," she says.

To combat this problem, DeSantis has said he'd like to see more choices offered in the health insurance field, so that people can buy plans that are less traditional which may fit their needs better.

He's also called for more transparency in health care pricing.

Marni Jameson Carey, executive director of the Association of Independent Doctors, which is headquartered in Winter Park, says she's glad to hear the governor is aware of a problem that her organization has been fighting since its inception.

"Health care is the only industry where you go in and purchase a service and don't know what it's going to cost you in the end," she says. "And the industry likes it that way because they get to charge more."

Former Gov. Scott was a champion of price transparency in health care as well. During his term, he pushed the state legislature to allocate money for a website that would allow people to compare prices for procedures at different facilities.

"This is not something the hospital association or the insurers are going to give up easily," Jameson Carey says. "They're going to fight tooth and nail, which is exactly what we expect and exactly what is happening."

Beyond price transparency, Jameson Carey would like to see DeSantis look into stopping the monopolies that are being created as health care providers merge.

"I would like to have him stop the consolidation that is happening in our health care market," she says. "All the mergers are driving health care prices way, way up."

Alker agrees transparency in health care is a good thing but she doesn't think it will solve much of the state's health care issues.

"There's an extraordinary amount of complexity in the health care system," she says. "The prices vary depend on who's paying them. And when you're hit by a bus, you're not looking at the prices."

More productive, she thinks, would be for the governor to look at drug pricing. And because of Florida's high uninsured population, she says the state should accept federal Medicaid expansion dollars. Alker was the principal investigator of a multi-year study on Florida's Medicaid program.

"I think it would be a cost saver for Florida," she says.

It's unlikely DeSantis will take up the issue with the Florida Legislature. Not only has he expressed opposition to the idea, but he has also selected Mary Mayhew, a former health commissioner from Maine who has been critical of Medicaid expansion, to head Florida's health care agency.

So as DeSantis navigates his new journey leading the state, Floridians will be closely watching his actions to see if he not only sticks to his campaign promises, but just as importantly, to make sure he also delivers the goods.

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