Ban Fracking In Florida

BY JORGE AGUILAR

jaaguilar@fwwatch.org

The fight to ban fracking in Florida is more than just an effort to preserve the especially vulnerable environment in the state. Florida’s economy thrives because of a robust tourism industry that is largely dependent on outdoor activities, most of them involving our precious water. Florida’s gorgeous beaches, its vacation destinations (like Orlando’s theme parks), and the extensive springs networks across Northern Florida are all now threatened by water-damaging industries like offshore drilling and fracking.

Food & Water Watch and the Floridians Against Fracking have been fighting against fracking and the oil industry alongside local activists and local groups that form the anti-fracking coalition. In 2013, after the discovery of unpermitted unconventional fracking operations by a Texas-based oil company in Collier County, the battle for a fracking ban lit up across the state. Since then, the anti-fracking movement has successfully mobilized four years’ worth of massive resistance against new fracking operations in the Everglades and the panhandle.

To date, 90 counties and cities have passed ordinances or resolutions in opposition to fracking in the state (communities representing almost 75% of Florida residents). After three years of beating back pro-fracking legislation, this legislative session became the first where a bill to ban fracking was introduced with bipartisan support. By the end of session, over 150 businesses had also come forward in support of the ban.

Although the bill did not pass this year, it had almost 50 sponsors, including powerful Republican leaders from both chambers. Half of the state senate members supported the ban bill until it stalled in the state house. But the end of session brought another victory for the anti-fracking movement with the defeat of an environmentally harmful, corporate giveaway of a bill. Not only did that bill call for investing in fracking in Oklahoma, it also allowed energy utility companies to charge Florida customers for speculative out-of-state investments like the Oklahoma venture. But Anti-fracking advocates

Bayfront 20:20

BY MARIELI A. DE JESUS

In late 2013 community leaders started a dialogue to create a roadmap for the future of the land that encompasses the 42 acres from Boulevard of the Arts to Payne Terminal surrounding the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. A vision statement was created to allow for broad community support and input: “We support the creation of a long-term master plan for the Sarasota bayfront area that will establish a cultural and economic legacy for the region while ensuring open, public access to the bayfront.”

Much like San Francisco did 50 years ago, Bayfront 20:20 wants to take advantage of the opportunity that presents itself today and leave the city of Sarasota a legacy to celebrate for years to come through a well-designed waterfront. No other planning opportunities for a metropolis downtown waterfront location of this large a scale exist anywhere else in Florida at this time.

During the 2017 ArchiFest hosted by the Herald Tribune, one of the many aspects discussed was the possibility of taking over the space that now houses the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall due to the Hall’s “outdated” architecture. Of those present, approximately 70% supported saving the Van Wezel. Stakeholders from the Bayfront 20:20 group say they will strive to give the community a space that connects the adjacent

The Clean Energy Revolution is Here

BY LYNN NILSSEN

Glaciers continue to melt in the Arctic and Antarctica. Based on the latest NOAA projections our area likely will see sea level rise of a half foot by 2040. With the decision by Trump to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement and the inaction of Congress to do much of anything to address the threats we face from climate change you might just want to give up.

I’d like to give you two good reason not to:

1) The economics are on the side of clean energy: The argument that renewables are too expensive is no longer valid. According to EnergySage, “Today, energy companies are developing solar PV projects that can deliver energy at half the cost of coal”. The amount of solar power coming online has nearly doubled from 2015 to 2016, enough to power 2 million homes.

Jobs in the renewable energy sector outnumber jobs in the coal and gas industry by a margin of 5 to 1 according to Department of Energy jobs data. The solar industry already employs over 260,000 people in the US. And has added $84 billion to the US GDP in 2016.

The clean disruption of the energy and transportation sectors is happening. The technology around renewable energy and transportation has advanced so quickly that we have reached the tipping point of where the...
Personal Reflections on the People’s Summit

BY DEEANNA DOWDLE

Are you powerless? Am I powerless? I thought I was powerless until I went to "The People's Summit" in Chicago on June 9th - 11th. But as progressive leaders like Bernie Sanders and Naomi Klein (author of the environmental best seller "This Changes Everything") spoke, I found my power. While listening to the over 20 speeches and breakout sessions I heard the same message repeated; Change in our government will not come from the top, but from the grassroots (grassroots means you and me). Water, Jobs and Justice; From Knowledge to Action: Big Organizing beyond Bernie; Empowering Locals and The Power of Perseverance; these were some of the sessions I attended.

Local activists Deanie Bergbreiter, Arlene Sweeting and I attended these empowering talks from nationally-known leaders and local leaders who reported their surprising successes of changing local and state wide government for the better. Better equals government that provides services to the citizens and responds to the citizen's voices and needs. For 40 years our government has incrementally been taken over by the money supplied to the campaigns of our officials by billionaires and corporations. We need to organize into a local force for good and we need you to help. A good start is to visit ProgressiveSarasota.org or CriticalTimes.org and come to a meeting to learn more. If you think you can't afford to devote any time to getting our democracy back, I say you can't afford not to. Start with an hour a week because your contribution of time is what builds a network of citizens is about. You and I are the only ones that can bring about positive changes to our government. So join me, now!

CONTINUED FRACKING PAGE 1

and good government watchdog organizations successfully all united to oppose this special interest bill and won.

Although House Speaker Richard Corcoran stood up to the energy special interests by killing the egregious pro-fracking bill, he failed to support the Florida fracking ban in his chamber. While let's remember the most crucial part: Florida’s groundwater is the drinking water source for 90 percent of Florida residents and a key part of our tourism and agricultural-based economy. Potable aquifers lie under over 85% of the state and Floridians pump over 3 billion gallons per day from our aquifers.

Our fight for a fracking ban is only more important and more urgent than ever. We’re coming back next session with a stronger and larger anti-fracking movement and we will pass a ban on fracking in Florida!

CONTINUED CLEAN ENERGY PAGE 1

We do indeed live in very exciting times. To learn more about the Ready for 100 campaign and get involved please contact me at lynnsierra@nilssen.us.

Progressive Sarasota Members Deanie Bergbreiter, DeeAnna Dowdle, and Arlene Sweeting, attended the 2017 People’s Summit in Chicago.
Artspace Sarasota?

BY MARIELI A. DE JESUS

In a city with so many universities, art programs, galleries, private art schools and more, Sarasota is starving for studio space. Enter ArtSpace, a nonprofit based in Minneapolis, MN, that was created around 30 years ago with the intent to create affordable housing and workspaces for artists around the United States.

Almost 20 years ago in Sarasota, many artists reunited at Towles Court in studios that were not all that developed. Eventually, the area attracted many restaurants and businesses that boosted the economy, making it too expensive for the artists to afford. With time, the artists were run out of the space they themselves cultivated. This phenomenon, not exclusive to Sarasota, fueled ArtSpace to create a nonprofit that provides artists with affordable live/work spaces around the United States, cultivates community, and focuses on the areas of the city that need redeveloping.

The Sarasota Arts and Cultural Alliance in partnership with The North Trail Redevelopment Corp. and with the strong hand of Veronica Morgan (mixed media artist and historic preservationist), reached out to ArtSpace to make it happen here in Sarasota. Morgan told the Herald Tribune in 2014: "It seemed to be a no-brainer for Sarasota. There are so many artists here. And there is zero housing."

Aqua by the Bay Continues to Hit Roadblocks

BY DENNIS MALEY

The Bradenton Times

Politically-connected developer Carlos Beruff is developing the last major portion of vacant coastal land on Sarasota Bay in Manatee County. Once called Long Bar Pointe, the controversial development is now being planned under the name Aqua by the Bay. Understand, the development will be built, but how many rules he's allowed to break and how much environmentally-sensitive land he gets to destroy remains to be seen.

Beruff originally wanted to include a hotel and a marina on the property, but public opposition made it difficult for the county commission to bend enough rules to allow that incarnation to permit the required dredging of critically-important waters where vital sea grass serves as an incubator for some of the most important feeder fish in local estuaries. This time around, there's no marina in the plans so far and the hotel has been scrapped, but Beruff wants to build a wall of high rises that would violate the county's rules on height, while also drastically altering the vistas of the shoreline.

In 2014 staff from ArtSpace visited Sarasota and held six meetings to pinpoint what had to be achieved to jumpstart the project and what the community needed. After the meeting, ArtSpace determined that Sarasota was an adequate candidate and that a mixed-use arts project could serve as a catalyst for redevelopment on the North Trail. With the support of the City of Sarasota, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the Historical Society, supporters started fundraising but came up short. The money raised was saved in an account until recently, when two interested citizens organized fundraising parties that eventually helped achieve the goal.

The developer also wants to dredge a large body of deep water behind the mangrove shoreline, which would provide access from the coastal property of homeowners to the waters of the bay, including docks. This feature violates the county's rule on having a 50-foot wetland buffer. Mangroves that do not abut the mainland are not as secure and are less likely to survive.

The next step is an "arts market survey" that will determine the needs of our local artist community. The survey will go live in late September/early October of this year and it will be up for approximately 60 days. Once the survey is complete, the data will be analyzed and turned into a report for the community to decide whether to go forward with the development or not.

The organizations behind this project have a clear mindset of including every type of art when it comes to defining an artist. Poets, writers, performers, illustrators, dancers and more are welcomed to be a part of the survey and provide input into the development of this project.

Beruff lost another battle last month when the Army Corps of Engineers shut down his request to use a wetland mitigation bank to offset the ones he'd be destroying. Developers use mitigation banks in order to achieve credits for wetlands they will damage or destroy during construction by having other disturbed wetlands restored and enhanced and then purchasing the resulting credits, but Beruff's planned bank didn't meet the qualifications. There are additional concerns over the amount of traffic that will be added to already strained roadways and hurricane evacuation routes in the immediate area. The application is currently scheduled to go back to the planning commission next month and then before the BOCC at a future date. Stay tuned.

The community can stay informed about this project through their official website, SarasotaBayfront2020.com, where all upcoming meetings, historical documents and contact methods can be found. Upcoming Board meetings take place from 3-5pm on July 18, August 1 and August 15 at the Blue Pagoda at 665 N. Tamiami Trail.
Following the 2016 electoral disaster, Jonathan Smucker’s provocative new book, *Hegemony How-to: A Roadmap for Radicals* (AK Press, 2017) has generated considerable buzz among students of social change. Now in his late thirties, Smucker left home and became deeply enmeshed in the global justice, antiracism and Occupy movements of the past fifteen years. His book is an attempt to grapple with lessons learned along the way in the hope of shaping more effective left political practices.

The central premise of Smucker’s book is that the larger social world must always be the starting place for those striving for social change. In practice, this means combating the ever-present tendency for insularity and self-marginalization that the larger social world must always be the underlying diagnosis. Of course, as November underscored, this ambivalence to political power comes with a very heavy price tag.

*Hegemony How-to* deserves praise for two other reasons. First, it is commendable for introducing useful social theory to the reader in digestible and unpretentious language. Don’t be put off if “hegemony” is not a part of your daily parlance; Smucker walks the reader through the concepts useful social theory to the reader in digestible and unpretentious language.

**Join us at The People’s Congress of Resistance!**

**BY JULIANA MUSHEYEV**

On September 16-17, resistors from across the country will come together in Washington D.C. at Howard University for the People’s Congress of Resistance. The local chapter of the ANSWER Coalition, ANSWER Suncoast, is asking local organizations in Florida to endorse the Congress and send delegates to join us.

The corrupt U.S. Congress represents and serves only the wealthy and is regularly paid off by the 15,000 lobbyists who constitute a shadow government in Washington. It is not and cannot be the voice of the people. It is dominated by two corrupt political parties – neither of which is truly representative of the people.

The People’s Congress of Resistance will be the voice of the people – an expression of direct democracy of those who are left out and kept out of the Congress of plutocrats. It will chart a path of nationwide grassroots resistance and mobilization to defeat Trump’s reactionary program of unrestrained capitalism. This path will draw on the experiences of the grassroots, amplifying the voices and spreading the tactics of those who are already fighting back to defend their communities.

The Congress is being convened by a broad coalition of leaders on the left, including Dennis Banks, Co-founder and National Director of the American Indian Movement, Juan Jose Gutierrez of the Full Rights for Immigrants Coalition, Mahdi Drat of the American Muslim Alliance, Dr. Margaret Flowers of Popular Resistance, and many more. So far over 100 local organizations across the country have endorsed the Congress and have agreed to send delegates.

One the conveners, Eugene Puryear of the Stop Police Terror Project in Washington D.C., explained the inspiration for the Congress, “We are taking our inspiration to some degree from the struggle of the people of South Africa against apartheid, when they set up the freedom charter,” said Puryear, “They came together and set up a common agenda of what it meant to be liberated…they built a huge movement based on people power that took on the most powerful forces in the world and won.”

“The goal of the People’s Congress is not to change the Congress of the United States, it is an institution of repression and oppression.” Says Brian Becker, National Coordinator of the ANSWER Coalition, and another convener of the Congress, “Change, if you think about it, never comes from the oppressor. Change only comes from the people.”

Becker explains that the Congress will be an instrument of struggle and education that shows people that we do have the power to change society, “If we feel that the billionaires, millionaires and politicians should have the power and we beg them for crumbs, then they will have the power. But if we feel that we have the power, and we know that we have the power, and we educate our class in the idea that we can be the power, we will be the power.”

If you are interested in finding out more about the People’s Congress of Resistance, visit congressofresistance.org or like the Facebook Page: facebook.com/CongressOfResistance

---

**Book Review**

**Hegemony How-To**

**BY SEAN SELLERS**

For example, Smucker bristles at the term “activist,” arguing that that contesting power isn’t a hobby or subculture but rather a collective project pervading all aspects of our lives.

This book is more fun than it may sound. Smucker’s main case study is Occupy Wall Street, which he became involved in reluctantly. While the example feels a bit dated, this movement, more than perhaps any other of the past two decades, underscores Smucker’s thesis that the left is fundamentally ambivalent about building political power. Occupy, he points out, was an incredibly effective symbolic intervention that revolutionized our discourse around inequality with its unifying frame of the 99% percent. However, the movement was ultimately unwilling to try and attempt to transform its symbolic power into political power. Therefore, after catalyzing to astonishing heights, it unraveled having only changed our language and not our policies. Smucker provides many supporting examples, and while readers may have a quibble here or there, it is difficult to disagree with the underlying diagnosis. Of course, as November underscored, this ambivalence to political power comes with a very heavy price tag.

*Hegemony How-to* deserves praise for two other reasons. First, it is commendable for introducing useful social theory to the reader in digestible and unpretentious language. Don’t be put off if “hegemony” is not a part of your daily parlance; Smucker walks the reader through the concepts useful social theory to the reader in digestible and unpretentious language. If you are interested in finding out more about the People’s Congress of Resistance, visit congressofresistance.org or like the Facebook Page: facebook.com/CongressOfResistance
Collard Greens Fest Returns In October

BY ADAR PITTS

The Newtown Farmers Market presents

Big Mama’s Collard Greens Fest

Cajun, Creole, Southern & Caribbean Style

October 21, 2017
12:00pm - 6:00pm

The festival will be on October 21, 2017 from 12 PM to 6 PM at the Robert Taylor Community Complex. Admission is free.

The festival will highlight collard greens recipes of Southern, Cajun, Creole, and Caribbean origin; these recipes have been passed down from generation to generation. There will also be vendors with delicious seafood, barbecue, and good, old southern cooking.

If you feel that you have the best greens in town, come and join the contest.

“This is not for the faint of heart,” warned Lou Murray, festival coordinator. “If you just cook greens and throw them in a pot and go down there, you’re going to be embarrassed.”

There will be legendary cooks participating from the Newtown, Bradenton, Palmetto, and Rubonia area.

“If you’ve got a reputation – if you go and cook greens for your church and people talk about your greens, you might want to come in and take a shot at it. The competition is pretty stiff,” said Murray.

For more information about the festival contact Lou Murray at (941) 524-7618 or Valerie Buchand at (941) 544-3262.

The Newtown Farmers Market operates the 1st and 3rd Friday and Saturday of every month. 1-6pm on Friday; 9:30am-1pm on Saturday.

Collard Greens Fest Returns In October
BY RJ MALLOY
Station Manager

“Building community through open communication” — that's what Brian Heron, grandson of the 1916 Irish Rebellion leader James Connolly, scrawled across the back of our bar bill at the Celtic Ray over 6 years ago. Communication, he insisted, was meaningless and useless unless it encompassed everything and everyone. Community, he said, could only form and hold together if that communication was open and available. And Brian should know, as he was the founder of the Irish Arts Center in New York and the Celtic Art Center in Hollywood, CA.

Surprisingly his evaluation of those centers of Irish community was that they were limited at best because they only included Irish thought. There was much more to be done in the realm of community organization and he was perplexed. How do we get beyond our own echo chambers of like-minded friends and get to some real conversation and change? Larry Maurer, longtime friend and techno-geek joined the discussion with the fateful statement, “we should do internet radio and broadcast to the world”.

We have found that open communication is the essential ingredient to compromise and mediation. But in order to find the true middle ground, we have to examine and understand the extreme sides. That required a solid commitment to respectful free speech. The overriding concept is that while I personally may not like what you have to say, I will defend your right to say it respectfully. And by allowing you to say it, I also need to be committed to truly hearing what you have said. In return, you need to allow me to do the same. It turns out that this is not that difficult a process.

And so here we are today. I am writing this in my office in North Port and looking out my window I can see the 100’ tower and dual antennae pushing out 24/7 news, talk, local music, and everything else we can convert to audio on WKDW 97.5 FM. A custom server is sitting in Phoenix, Arizona, connected directly to the fiber optic backbone and providing unlimited bandwidth for internet listeners on kdwradio.com. On my desk there’s a letter from an MP in Belfast, Ireland thanking us for our Irish World Radio project (irishworldradio.com) where we broadcast all of the music and commentary that is banned from broadcast in Northern Ireland.

Which brings us back to radio, both internet and FM. It is both a powerful tool to build community and a terrible weapon that can be used to destroy it. So, the quest becomes sacred in nature, do we build or destroy. It is a labor of love and we choose to build. Join us and check out WKDW 97.5 — the voice of the North Port Community, kdwradio.com.

Stand Up for Democracy PAC Started

BY JEFFREY R. ORENSTEIN, PH.D.

A newly-formed grassroots progressive political action committee, Stand Up 4 Democracy PAC, held its first general meeting on June 28th. The PAC’s initial focus will be finding and supporting independent candidates for local, state and federal offices in the greater Sarasota-Manatee community, including the Tampa Bay region. It is, or will soon be, registered with appropriate federal and state authorities as required and be transparent in its donors and endorsements.

Stand Up 4 Democracy PAC has elected five officers (President Jeffrey R. Orenstein, Ph.D., VP Trent Miller, Treasurer Susan Grundy, CPA, Secretary Bettye Andrews and Legal Officer Maureen Chiofalo, Esq.) and four at-large board members, Lesa Miller, Virginia Orenstein, Eric Belmont and Veronica Belmont for initial terms ending in December 2018.

PAC President Jeffrey R. Orenstein, Ph.D., a retired political science professor and author of books on public policy said, “Instead of merely complaining about unfairly-drawn Congressional and state legislative districts and politicians who vote to protect the special interests and ignore the rest of us, we’re going to take action and take back our political system. We intend to recruit and vet good candidates, help them become effective campaigners and provide them with money and volunteers. We’re also going to stand up for sound democratic government and oppose efforts to subvert democracy by any means.”

Board member Eric Belmont, a retired automobile executive, said, “We are not affiliated with any political party or candidate committee, although our board of directors are all progressive Democrats. Forming an independent PAC gives us many advantages such as being able to support like-minded candidates early in the electoral cycle, work within entire districts and regions crossing many city and county boundaries, and to have a permanent presence in the entire region.”

“Parties cannot do the job alone. Federal campaign contribution limits have not been adjusted for inflation in more than 40 years. The maximum individual contribution limit of $1,000 set in 1974 is worth less than $300 in current dollars. We will do our part to help candidates we select to become viable contenders,” Orenstein said.

The PAC’s committees are already meeting and a website domain (SU4DPAC.org) has been reserved and a website is currently being designed. Citizens wishing to help can apply for PAC membership by agreeing to the PAC’s stated principles and paying dues of $20.20.

Yes to Second Chances

BY ADAR PITTs

SCLO’s colorful headquarters is easy to find on MLK Avenue.

“We want to remind the individuals that walk through these doors that they don’t have to settle. They can live a better life and they can get a good job, but it’s up to them — how they want their story to start and how they want their story to end,” said April Glasco, founder and CEO of Second Chance - Last Opportunity (SCLO).

Second Chance - Last Opportunity is a non-profit organization that offers life management skills to at-risk teens and low-income/homelss families. The organization's mission is to empower individuals in crisis by providing them with essential skills and tools so they can manage their lives more productively. The organization began in 1992.

“I started with a house. I put homeless women with children in there to help them get a new start in life. I taught life skills,” said Glasco. “They were young ladies that had no direction at all.”

The organization has expanded and now offers programs such as, life-management skills training, parenting skills training, counseling, mentoring, HIV-AIDS education and counseling, summer and after-school youth programs, food, clothing and shelter referrals, and holiday meals and food distribution.

“Life skills is the focus and the core of what Second Chance does. And it is so important that we gain our skills to be effective at what we do,” said Glasco. “When we teach these skills, we want these individuals to get it so they can teach it to their children so we can have a community that is whole again.”

SCLO’s also offers a year-around “Out of the Box” youth program available to teens ages 12-18. The program is designed to help the participants gain the confidence and courage to be the best that he/she can be.

The program includes mentoring, discussion, role-play, activities, and field trips on subjects such as coping skills, conflict avoidance and resolution, communication skills, anger management, and family relationships. Out of the Box is held on Thursdays and Fridays with a field trip on Saturdays once a month.

Second Chance- Last Opportunity will be hosting its Share the Light Luncheon on October 19 at Michael’s on East. “We share our accomplishments for a whole year of what we have done to help people in the community and how we collaborate with many agencies,” said Glasco.

For more information on the SCLO programs and events, call 941-360-8660 or visit www.secondchancelastopportunity.org.
WSLR is an innovative, listener-supported nonprofit, noncommercial FM radio station dedicated to serving the Sarasota community. WSLR features locally produced programming and events that present cultural, artistic and political perspectives currently underrepresented in the media. Our goal is to inform and empower listeners to play an active role in WSLR and in their community. WSLR promotes equality, peace, sustainability, democracy, health, and social and economic justice.
Editorial: Public Education Under Attack

BY SHIRLEY BROWN
Sarasota County School Board Member

Public education in Florida is under attack by the Legislature, and that was never more evident than in this year’s legislative session.

While HB15 increased the amount of per student funding, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship vouchers by an average of $1200/student, the legislature cut the base student funding for public schools by $27.07/student. In addition, a 274-page amendment filed to HB7069 in the last minutes of session may require as much as $1380/per student be transferred from Sarasota’s local budget to fund corporate and charter schools annually. Governor Scott called a special session after he vetoed the education budget. However, speculation has it that in exchange for signing the controversial HB7069, a priority for the House Speaker, Scott would get funds for his priority, Enterprise Florida, along with a bump in funding for public schools.

Charter schools started as a way to give parents a choice in their children’s education. They were supposed to offer unique alternatives to the public schools and could help relieve the overcrowding in some fast-growing districts. Charter school operators are paid with local and state taxes at the same rate as public schools, must follow state mandated curriculum standards and hire certified teachers, but they run the day to day functions with their own administration and governing boards.

Sarasota is fortunate to have several good charter schools, run by local boards that do offer something unique. However, while charter schools used to have to gain the approval of the local district, the legislature has loosened the rules so that it is easier for corporate charter school operators to open schools in areas they think would be profitable for them, regardless of the needs of the local school districts. They often come in to an area and build a school and then have the charter school lease it back from them at up to twice the average lease rates for the area. I’m sure that is why while public school advocates were asking the governor to veto HB7069, charter school advocates compared the proliferation of the local provision as the killing of local dollars which were traditionally used for district growth and maintenance priorities will now go to charter schools, regardless of their needs. In addition, local taxpayers will have no claim to any assets purchased with these funds.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program was a program touted as a way to give low income parents an option to their failing neighborhood schools and save the state money. Corporations could get a 100% tax credit for assigning taxes they owe to this program. Students on Free or Reduced lunch programs from failing schools could get a voucher worth 80% of the amount that would have gone to the public school. When more money flowed into the program than applicants who wanted to sign up for these “scholarships,” the rules were changed so that the student didn’t have to come from a “failing” public school and then to not having to have attended any public school. Income levels were also raised so that a family at 200% of poverty could obtain a scholarship and a family at 260% of poverty ($64,000 for a family of 4) could obtain a 50% scholarship. Scholarship amounts were increased this year to 96% of the amount generated for a high school student, 92% for grades 6-8 and 88% for grades K-5.

Hundreds of new schools have sprouted up all over the state. Parents have no way to check on their academic performance or financial status. Schools accepting these scholarships or vouchers can still bill the parents for the balance of their tuition if the voucher doesn’t cover their full tuition charges, and they do not have to provide free lunches, transportation, special services or aftercare. Nor do they have to follow the rules for public schools regarding curriculum, certified teachers, testing and other laws. Since the majority of religious schools are religious schools, they don’t even have to comply with some laws on discrimination and students with disabilities.

One of the most startling aspects of the law of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is found in 1002.359(5)(a) that allows the total amount that corporations can contribute to increase by 25% annually. This means the program more than doubles every 4 years. This year’s $550 million cap on the amount of tax credits available will increase by $140 million next year and legislators didn’t help on a cap on the increase.

My concern about the increase in dollars the state is giving to charter and private school vouchers is the lack of accountability for these funds. If a charter school or private school closes in the state, we lose those tax dollars. In addition, the public schools will have to scramble to accommodate these students with their existing resources. We are not just playing on a level field. If the legislation feels that state mandated standards, tests and teacher evaluations are the way to improve public schools, why aren’t all schools that accept public funds held to the same standard? In addition, public schools must be built to last for a 50-year life span and must be used as hurricane shelters. Charter schools need only be built to 25 year standards. Any assets purchased with local capital dollars shared with charter schools are the property of the charter school and/or its parent organization as opposed to reverting to the school districts. Levy school districts are required to show for what they spend in new schools and where they can be placed. Private and charter schools have no such restrictions.

I believe if the legislature truly wants Florida schools to outperform schools from other states, they need to quit funding us at one of lowest rates. If they increase the base student allocation, funds will still not flow to the failing traditional public and charter schools, as well as private schools that accept vouchers. The way to increase teacher salaries which run $10,000 below national averages, is not with bonus programs based on their performance on a SAT test taken in high school, but by increasing the base funding for our schools so we have the funds to pay our teachers more. Legislators need to stop calling schools “government” schools and realize that good schools are only part of the solution to better student performance. Poverty, crime, health, mental health, disabilities, and poor parents skills are as much a part of the problem, and Florida lawmakers should be expected to control all of these issues, but funding should be made available for the ones we can help to overcome and given to other groups that can help with the rest.

Restoring Voting Rights

BY DEANIE BERGBREITER

Nationally, Florida is one of only three states that permanently ban voting rights for ex offenders (Iowa and Kentucky are the others). But Florida notoriously ranks as the worst state for voter disenfranchisement (Iowa and Kentucky are the others). Florida’s felony voter disenfranchisement law has existed since the Reconstruction area and accounting for a staggering 25% of those disenfranchised nationwide.

Florida’s felony voter disenfranchisement law has existed since the Reconstruction area and was used to keep black residents from gaining political power. Except for minor changes in 1968, Article VI, Section 5 of the Florida Constitution still provides “No person convicted of a felony... shall be qualified to vote...until restoration of civil rights.”

Over 1.6 million people are disenfranchised due to felony convictions - that’s 10% of all Floridians. Although three out of four people who have lost their right to vote in Florida are white, the voting power disproportionally affects lower income minorities. While black residents make up only 16% of the population, 25% of voting age black residents in Florida are barred from voting due to felony convictions.

The current clemency process in Florida is notoriously difficult. During his term as governor, Charlie Crist (R) made it easier for former felons to regain their rights, restoring the right to vote to more than 155,000 people. But current Gov. Rick Scott (R) reversed that change in 2011 and mandated a waiting period before felons could even apply for clemency. Just 2,487 people have regained their voting rights since Scott took office in 2010. Shamefully, 77% of Floridians currently denied the right to vote have already completed parole, but excludes people convicted of murder or terms of a felony conviction, including probation or parole, but excludes people convicted of murder or

Desmond Meade, chairman of Floridians for a Fair Democracy, has been spearheading the fight to give formerly incarcerated individuals a chance to vote again. On April 20, 2017 the Voting Restoration Amendment Language was approved by the Florida Supreme Court to appear on the 2018 ballot. It’s now up to supporters to collect the 753,603 signatures needed (8% of Florida voters) by February of 2018. The amendment restores voting rights for felons after they complete all terms of a felony conviction, including probation or parole, and all related fines and fees and allows for automatic restoration of the right to vote.

According to a 2016 study, felon disenfranchisement affects election results for both parties, but more so for Democrats. The study showed that based on income and race demographics, if the ban had not existed in 2008, the effect would have won Florida, and Democrats would have won the White House.

The right to vote is the most fundamental right we can protect in a democracy, and it deserves our attention regardless of politics. Floridians agree: 73% of the population supports restoring voting rights - 83% of Democrats and 63% of Republicans. Contact Progressive Sarasota at Progressivesarasota@gmail.com to volunteer or download and sign a copy of the petition at floridiansforafairdemocracy.com.