

VIEWPOINTS

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Column

NASCAR, Publix get tax breaks in Florida. You get higher tolls

The headline stripped atop the Orlando Sentinel's front page at the end of this past legislative session seemed like it should've been accompanied by a sad-trombone sound.



SCOTT MAXWELL

"Tax relief collapses as session ends." Womp womp. It sure seemed sad for taxpayers.

The governor and the Legislature's GOP leaders had spent months promising you tax relief. But then, Golly Ned, they just couldn't manage to deliver.

Well, not to you anyway. The special interests, though, well, they got tax breaks galore.

NASCAR scored one on its ticket sales. So did Publix on lease taxes. South Florida casinos even scored one on slot machines.

Much of that was summed up in a follow-up story: "DeSantis signs austerity budget, saves Florida businesses nearly \$1 billion in taxes."

So to recap: Business lobbyists scored a billion bucks in tax savings while efforts to provide you relief collapsed.

But wait, there's one more headline you should see that ran in the Sentinel this past week: "Tolls increasing on Central Florida roadways."

You'd better believe all of this is connected. See, when lawmakers give corporations a pass, someone else has to pay. And that someone is usually you. If the state doesn't collect enough money for roads, road builders have to find other ways to pay for them.

That is why Florida has more miles of tolled roads than any other state in America.

Many states consider providing free-to-drive roads a basic function of government. Florida gives businesses tax breaks and then forces you to make up the difference one toll at a time, at a rate that's constantly climbing.

Florida bills itself as a not-tax state. But it's really a low-tax state for corporations.

While the state doesn't collect income taxes on individuals — by order of the Florida Constitution — the state taxes residents to death in other ways.

In Florida, you face above-average sales taxes, hefty property taxes, some of the highest gas taxes in America and the highest number of toll-road miles.

Why? Because a tax burden is like a pie. It must always add up to 100%. So when the corporate share of the pie goes down, yours usually goes up.

And in Florida — where only about 1% of businesses pay corporate income taxes and where lawmakers keep reducing the other taxes businesses pay — your piece of the tax-burden pie keeps getting bigger.

This past session, the biggest tax break, about a billion dollars' worth, was given to businesses that previously paid taxes on leases. That tax was raised

after companies like Publix lobbied for years to have their tax bills reduced. In 2023, the Flori-

da-based supermarket chain had five lobbyists pushing to reduce its tax payments.

You can actually make a fair argument that this was a bad tax, since it taxed businesses on money they spend to do business rather than on profits they reap. The problem is that Florida doesn't collect many taxes on profits. So this tax was one of the few that actually forced businesses to pay anything. And now it's gone.

Another tax break was awarded to NASCAR, exempting the sales tax levied on tickets to the NASCAR Cup Series Championship Races at the Homestead-Miami Speedway. Some economists say that's more of a gift to NASCAR than the fans, since ticket sellers can then jack up prices and then keep all the money for themselves. More problematic in my mind, it's not a level playing field, since some ticket-selling businesses get this break while others do not.

Gambling interests also scored tax breaks, specifically card rooms and casinos at horse tracks where lawmakers cut everything from the pari-mutuel taxes to the license fees for slot machines.

Meanwhile, efforts to provide direct relief to you, the average taxpayer, went largely unfulfilled with only very targeted sales tax exemptions granted on things like hurricane supplies and purchases associated with outdoor activities.

Think bottled water and bug spray. So you save 24 cents on a can of OFF! while Publix saves a few million on lease payments.

Welcome to Florida, where cor-

porate lobbying is a pleasure.

GOP lawmakers also shot down another proposal to provide tax relief to real-life Floridians when they caved to the state's tourism lobby and refused to allow counties to spend hotel taxes on services locals need, such as roads, transit, police and affordable housing. By letting tourism interests hoard these tax dollars for themselves, lawmakers force local taxpayers to shoulder the tax burden. You've seen the results, as Orange County leaders have repeatedly proposed raising your taxes, partly because state lawmakers won't let them spend hotel taxes on pressing needs.

Of the two proposals GOP lawmakers had floated to help everyday Floridians — both of which they abandoned — one had merit.

Republican House Speaker Danny Perce's proposal to reduce sales taxes statewide would've added up to real relief on a regressive tax that hits everyone.

Gov. Ron DeSantis' proposal — to reduce or even abolish the property taxes collected by local governments — was simply nonsensical. It would be like Publix declaring that Winn-Dixie should cut prices.

The real problem is that these same lawmakers can't afford to give you meaningful relief, because they keep providing it to the corporations that cut them big campaign checks.

So instead of getting relief, you get higher sales taxes, higher gas taxes and yet another toll hike.

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Column

7 years after the Parkland school shooting that killed 17, the work still isn't over

Seven years ago, 17 lives were senselessly taken at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland. Families were forever shattered — our sons and daughters, spouses, siblings, friends, and teachers never came home. We speak not only as individuals who lost loved ones, but as representatives of families across the country who have endured similar heartbreak — or may face the same unimaginable grief if our nation fails to act.

Following the tragedy, Florida enacted some of the most comprehensive school safety reforms in the country.

Through the work of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission — established to investigate the systemic failures that led to the shooting — Florida emerged as a national model. The Commission's data-driven, apolitical recommendations were adopted by leaders who have the courage to act, resulting in real and lasting change.

Today, our schools are safer because Florida prioritized prevention, accountability, and collaboration. But our work is far from over. The threats change constantly.

We must ensure behavioral threat assessments, using our state-specific model, are conducted thoroughly and consistently, with agencies and schools working in lockstep. Students showing signs of distress or violent ideation need early intervention — not punishment, but support and safeguards to protect themselves and others.

At the same time, we must make sure that students exhibiting violent ideation are not falling through the cracks due to a lack of trained professional mental health counselors or a failure to recognize early warning signs. Our nation must close these persistent gaps in mental health care at our schools. Expanding the resources to identify students in distress and help them throughout the behavioral threat assessment is critical to prevention.

Strengthening school security must remain a priority — through training, technology, and coordination with law enforcement. Florida's Guardian Program, school resource officers, and infrastructure upgrades have improved both deterrence and emergency response.

These reforms should not be extraordinary — they should be the baseline. Florida, a red state with Republican leadership at every level, proved that conservative values and student safety are not in conflict. Our leaders reached across the aisle; they didn't just offer thoughts and prayers — they took meaningful action. Other states should follow this model — not for political credit, but to save lives.

That spirit of collaboration extended to the Trump administration, which supported state-level safety efforts through initiatives like the Federal Commission on School Safety and increased funding for mental health. As a new Trump administration begins, there's a renewed opportunity to recommit to this mission with urgency.

Just weeks ago, a gunman opened fire on Florida State University's campus, injuring students and reminding us that this crisis spans every level of education. The trauma of Parkland is not distant history — it echoes every time students run, hide, or pray for their lives. This is a national crisis, from elementary classrooms to college campuses.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission remains a beacon. It has always been about data and accountability — not politics. The safety of our children the future of our nation must come before partisanship.

Each new school shooting reopens our deepest wounds. The families of Stand with Parkland know what it means to get the call. To wait outside a school, hoping your child walks out. And to know what it feels like when they don't.

We owe it to every victim of school violence — past and future — to act with resolve and purpose. Florida has shown what's possible when people work together, when we move beyond blame and toward solutions.

Let's come together to ensure that every classroom in America is a place of learning — not a site of tragedy.

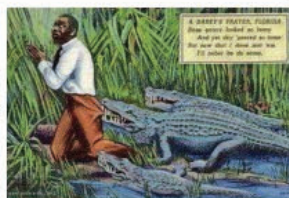
There is no more time to waste.

Tony Montalto is the president of Stand with Parkland — The National Association of Families for Safe Schools, and the father of Gina Montalto, who was killed in the Parkland shooting.

Bob Gualtieri is Pinellas County sheriff and was chair of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission.



During the Jim Crow era in Florida, postcards including these were commonly sold at store counters and tourist attractions. (Florida Archives)



Column

Alligator Alcatraz and the mutating racism of the Florida swamp

"I don't kind of love it; I really love it!" That's Lawrence Jones, Fox host and MAGA cheerleader, gushing over Alligator Alcatraz, the appalling emblem of the new Trump-DeSantis alliance.

Jones and his colleagues on Fox's "Outnumbered," chuckled their way through Florida's swagging ad for the new facility, giggling about keeping "illegal" in the name. One panelist, and Democrats out. One panelist,

looking momentarily queasy, commented gingerly: "I just want to make sure we're not gleeful about the image of alligators eating humans, because that's not what this is about."

A few sage nods, before more hilarity ensues. Make no mistake, the image of alligators eating humans is exactly what all this excitement is about. And as I scroll through the gleeful Alligator Alcatraz graphics and cheap, imported merch — giant gators, lunging, their wide-open jaws ready to crush escapees — I recall another set of popular images, most now banished to academic collections. In the early 20th century, during the heyday of the Florida postcard, some vacationers just loved them. These cards featured African Americans being attacked by alligators or serving as "alligator bait," often accompanied by an "amusing" rhyme. Black adults were "coons," "darkies," or worse, and children were "pickaninnies." Caricatured as hapless victims, often with exaggerated "minstrel" features, they offered laughs to white audiences. They're not hard to find online: Florida International University lists one, captioned "Free lunch in the Everglades, Florida." Printed in Tampa in 1940, this postcard shows a terrified Black man caught in an alligator's jaws, accompanied by a verse:

"Have you met the Florida Gator? He is the champion negro hater. Although he finds many things to eat His favorite morsel is Negro meat."

Or there's "Darky's Prayer," from the special collections at Mississippi State University, showing alligators attacking another Black man, who prays for escape in stereotyped dialect. It was mailed from Tampa in 1944, with a scrawled message, "Very warm but having a good time ... Mom." Others show terrified children sitting in trees while alligators snap at their dangling feet.

All while families enjoy the beaches and look past the Black people serving their drinks and maintaining their resorts. Sounds familiar? Dehumanizing? Of course.

I haven't yet seen T-shirts or merch actually depicting an "illegal" clamped in an alligator's jaws — maybe our sensibilities have matured slightly in a century. But surely it won't be long. Social media comments are full of such gleeful anticipation — "Can't wait till the first one escapes, and we get pics or video."

All this represents the stunning success of a key MAGA narrative that has eclipsed the earlier, Black boogeyman. Our nation has been over-run by criminals who represent "the worst of the worst." Responding to claims that the new prison is dehumanizing, White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller spatters: "What's 'dehumanizing' is when American citizens are stripped of their rights and their liberties by the invasion of illegal aliens!" Exactly what rights American citizens are losing isn't clear, but that's not the point. The endless stream of words — murderer, rapist, lunatic — are all that matters. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem notched this up with her latest story about a "cannibal alien": "I was talking to some marshals partnering with ICE (who) detained a cannibal and put him on a plane, and while they had him in his seat, he started to eat himself. These are the kind of deranged individuals that are on our streets."

Again, no matter that this bizarre story is completely unverified. It's out there, festering in the internet swamp. Does any sane person believe there are thousands of lunatics and violent criminals ready to be shipped to the Everglades, rather than the day laborers and cooks we see swept up every day? Fox's smirking Jesse Watters knows the answer: "Jose better not bust out of Croc Rock. If he does, he'd better bring his flippers, because ICE gators are lurking." Racist conspiracy theorist Laura Loomer is unapologetic about her goal for every American Latino: "the good news is alligators are guaranteed at least 65 million meals if we start now."

There is much to loathe about this prison, with its rows of dog-kennel cages. The impact on the fragile Everglades, the disrespect for indigenous values, the cost, the corruption as mega-donors snap up contracts. But what makes me most nauseous is the gleeful hate it has unleashed.

Those last-century images represented just a few of the thousands of cheerful cards sent across the country and the world. But some holiday-makers clearly found them hilarious. I've seen a flood of social media condemnation of Alligator Alcatraz — but hate still spreads at a rate never imagined in the 1940s. Yesterday, I saw a meme that moves things to the next level — a satisfied alligator with a brown arm hanging from its mouth. "I love Mexican food."

No doubt it got people laughing. And further fed the ever-mutating cycle of racism that has plagued America since its birth.

Elizabeth Bird is professor emerita of Anthropology at USF. Since retiring, she focuses on essays and personal writing: tishbirdwrites.com

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