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Florida Playbook

Gary Fineout's must-read briefing on what's hot, crazy or shady about politics in the Sunshine State

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Florida's Covid-19 emergency ends — Death toll rises in condo collapse — 1st cruise ship leaves Florida since pandemic — Toll road repeal gets mixed reviews

By **GARY FINEOUT** | 06/28/2021 06:58 AM EDT

Presented by USA-IT

Hello and welcome to Monday.

Tragedy — The grim task of searching the rubble of the collapsed condo in Surfside continues in South Florida as families and friends continue to wait for answers about the tragedy still unfolding.

Return to normal — But this past weekend something else happened — very quietly.

Emergency is over — Florida's Covid-19 state of emergency declared by Gov. Ron DeSantis expired on Saturday. It had been in place for 475 days and the Republican governor used his powers under the order to shut the state down, open it back up again, spend billions in money without legislative authorization, and block local rules and regulations.

Unprecedented — This exercise of power was something unseen before in Florida, which for decades has limited the authority handed to its governors. While power expanded under Jeb Bush, Charlie Crist and Rick Scott, it soared to new levels under DeSantis. This led to some quiet grumbling among lawmakers — and warnings about what would happen under a Democratic governor in the future — so legislators this past session put some additional guidelines in place on future governors. One of the changes was making it clear that the Legislature can void any specific executive orders related to a state of emergency.

Pause to reflect — DeSantis, for his part, has vowed to never again impose any kind of lockdowns and he has used Florida's pandemic response to become a national conservative rock star and catapult to the top of possible 2024 presidential contenders. But even as normalcy returns, it's important to remember that nearly 38,000 Floridians died from Covid-19 during this state of emergency.

— **WHERE'S RON?** — Gov. Ron DeSantis is expected be in South Florida due to the ongoing search-and-rescue effort in Surfside.

Have a tip, story, suggestion, birthday, anniversary, new job, or any other nugget for Playbook? Get in touch: gfineout@politico.com

A message from USA-IT:

With world-class beaches along 1,350 miles of shoreline, what makes Florida such an attractive place to live also makes it attractive to smugglers and traffickers. This illegal trade affects the safety and quality of life of all 21 million Floridians. Florida deserves better. And that's why our partners are proud to be on the ground in 2021. United to safeguard Florida from illegal trade, we're working together to fight back.

DRIVING THE DAY

AFTERMATH — “Condo collapse death toll at 9 as families of the missing make first visit to ruins,” by Miami Herald’s Bianca Padro Ocasio, David J. Neal, David Goodhue and Alex Harris: “The latest victims were discovered along with ‘additional human remains’ in a 125-foot long trench dug into the rubble to aid rescue and recover teams — the newest tactic in the round-the-clock excavation of an unstable, sometimes shifting mountain of concrete and twisted steel. At a Sunday evening press conference, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said the four more of the dead have been identified, and authorities were notifying families before making the names public.”

STILL WAITING — “Families of the missing visit site of Florida condo collapse,” by The Associated Press’ Terry Spencer and Russ Bynum: “Families of the missing visited the scene of the Florida condo building collapse Sunday as rescuers kept digging through the mound of rubble and clinging to hope that someone could yet be alive somewhere under the broken concrete and twisted metal. The death toll rose by just four people, to a total of nine confirmed dead. But after almost four full days of search-and-rescue efforts, more than 150 additional people were still missing in Surfside. No one has been pulled alive from the pile since Thursday, hours after the collapse.”

WHAT HAPPENED? — “Surfside official was sent disturbing report. He told board condo was in ‘good shape,’” by Miami Herald’s Aaron Leibowitz, Mary Ellen Klas and Sarah Blaskey: “A month after an engineer’s report flagged ‘major structural damage’ at Champlain Towers South, the chief building official for the town of Surfside told residents the condominium was ‘in very good shape,’ according to minutes from a November 2018 board meeting obtained by the Miami Herald. Ross Prieto, who left the post last year, had reviewed the engineer’s report, the minutes say. Records show condo board member Mara Chouela forwarded a copy to him two days earlier.”

— **“Relative of Surfside building collapse victim lashes out at DeSantis for not ‘doing enough,’” by WPLG’s Christian De La Rosa, Janine Stanwood and Andrea Torres**

— **“Miami-Dade mayor: We dearly hope collapse was ‘an anomaly,’” by POLITICO’s Allie Bice**

— **“Condo collapse: Despite broken pelvis after 4-story fall, Mom pulls daughter out of rubble,” by CBS 4’s Bobeth Yates**

— **“See what experts say is the probable sequence of collapse at the Florida condo tower,” by Miami Herald’s Sarah Blaskey and Sohail Al-Jamea**

— **“Before Florida condo collapse, \$9 million in repairs were needed,” by The Associated Press**

THE LIVES BEHIND THE NUMBERS:

— **“He was a father, baseball fan and helped many. He was killed in the collapse near Miami Beach,” by Miami Herald’s Joey Flechas**

— **“In town for COVID funeral, man vanishes in Florida collapse,” by Associated Press’ Adriana Gomez Licon**

— **“Lost at Surfside, Florida: Elderly couple died together in condo collapse,” by Florida Times-Union’s Emily Bloch**

— **“I hope she put her arms around her little girl’: 5 members of Argentine family missing,” by Miami Herald’s Connie Ogle**

‘WAKEUP CALL’ — “Condo collapse in Surfside triggers fears in coastal cities,” by Sun Sentinel’s Susannah Bryan and Mario Arza: “As the world spotlight shines on Surfside’s condo collapse, other coastal cities in South Florida are asking the question: Could it happen here? Those same cities want to make sure it doesn’t. Miami-Dade County is already planning an audit of older buildings after Thursday’s collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo. Coastal cities from Fort Lauderdale to Hollywood, Hallandale Beach and Boca Raton are doing the same. “The tragedy that happened in Surfside certainly is a wakeup call for all communities with buildings that were built 40 and 50 years ago,’ Fort Lauderdale Mayor Dean Trantalis said Sunday.”

— **“After Surfside condo collapse, Miami-Dade says more scrutiny coming to older buildings,” by Miami Herald’s Douglas Hanks**

— **“Listen, is my building safe?’ Champlain Towers North residents seek relief from Surfside mayor,” by Palm Beach Post’s John Bisognano and Hannah Morse**

— **“Surfside hires engineer to consult on fatal condo collapse, check nearby buildings,” by Miami Herald’s Martin Vassolo and David Goodhue**

CORONAVIRUS UPDATES

ANCHORS AWEIGH — “1st post-pandemic cruise ship from U.S. sails away,” by The Associated Press’ Adriana Gomez Licon and Marta Lavandier: “The first cruise ship to leave a U.S. port since the coronavirus pandemic brought the industry to a 15-month standstill sailed away on Saturday with nearly all vaccinated passengers on board. Celebrity Edge departed Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at 6 p.m. with the number of passengers limited to about 40% capacity, and with nearly all 1,100 passengers vaccinated against COVID-19.”

Got the shot — “Celebrity Cruises, one of Royal Caribbean Cruise’s brands, says 99% of the passengers are vaccinated, well over the 95% requirement imposed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A giant greeting was projected on a wall of one of the port buildings: ‘Someday is here. Welcome back.’ Passengers arrived with matching T-shirts that read phrases such as ‘straight outta vaccination’ and ‘vaccinated and ready to cruise.’”

CAMPAIGN MODE

LOOKS LIKE THIS IS HAPPENING — Rebekah Jones, the former Department of Health employee who worked on Florida’s Covid-19 dashboard, has filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission saying she is running as independent candidate for the northwest Florida congressional seat now held by embattled Rep. **Matt Gaetz**. She also has set up a campaign committee and opened up a bank account. Jones, who earned national attention for allegations that the state manipulated Covid-19 data, is running in a ruby-red Republican district that likely will not change in any major fashion during redistricting in early 2022.

EYES ON IOWA — “The 2024 Iowa caucus campaign has already begun,” by POLITICO’s Alex Isenstadt: “At least one Republican, however, is purposely avoiding the state. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has drawn widespread national interest from conservatives, doesn't have any trips to Iowa planned out of concern that it will further stoke speculation he's prepping a 2024 bid. DeSantis allies say they're focused squarely on his 2022 reelection effort and view talk of a presidential campaign as an unwelcome distraction.”

HOLDING ON — “House Dems head off retirement crisis — for now,” by POLITICO’s Ally Mutnick and Sarah Ferris: Rep. Stephanie Murphy was hiring staff for an all-but-declared Senate bid in Florida. Rep. Madeleine Dean consulted with Democratic leaders about a potential statewide run in her home state of Pennsylvania. And in Texas, Rep. Vicente Gonzalez was fighting off rumors of retirement. But all three House

Democrats have since declared that they do plan to seek reelection next November, in a sign that the wave of members departing from the House has slowed — at least for now. “I will one day, but it won't be anytime soon,” Gonzalez, who faced a surprising scare last November as parts of his district swung sharply toward Republicans, said of a possible retirement. “We've hired people. We've got more of a robust fundraising operation going on. We've been up and down throughout the region.”

Looming — It is still early, and there will almost certainly be another exodus of members next year after a potentially painful round of redistricting for Democrats. Some seats in states like Florida and Texas could see purple districts rendered unwinnable by map-drawing Republicans — which could spur some members, even those who have already said they would run for reelection, to head abruptly for the exits.

Staying put — Democrats are also losing Val Demings and Charlie Crist in Florida, but they are expected to keep Murphy, who ruled out a Senate bid and has begun fundraising for her House run, according to people close to her. That's a huge boon for Democrats, who consider her to be a star recruit with a powerful biography — she fled Vietnam by boat as an infant, and her family was rescued at sea by the U.S. Navy — and a strong donor pool.

DATELINE D.C.

X-FILES UPDATE — “Government report can't explain UFO's, but offers no evidence of aliens,” by POLITICO's Bryan Bender and Andrew Desiderio: A new intelligence report sent to Congress on Friday concludes that virtually all of the 144 sightings of unidentified flying objects documented by the military since 2004 are of unknown origin, in an extremely rare public accounting of the U.S. government's data on UFOs that is likely to fuel further speculation about phenomena the intelligence community has long struggled to understand.

Rubio's response — Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), the vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, led the push after revelations in 2017 that a Pentagon office was tracking a number of unexplained sightings reported by Navy pilots. For decades prior, though, former presidents as well as former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) urged a greater focus on the phenomenon. Rubio hailed the report as “an important first step” but said the Pentagon and intelligence community “have a lot of work to do before we can

actually understand whether these aerial threats present a serious national security concern.”

— **“Brian Mast dubs Ethics Committee ‘a partisan clown show’ after mask fine upheld,” by Florida Politics’ Ryan Nicol**

... DATELINE TALLAHASSEE ...

‘REAR-VIEW MIRROR’ — “Bill signing to repeal state toll roads program received mixed response,” by POLITICO’s Bruce Ritchie: Environmentalists on Friday offered mixed responses to Gov. Ron DeSantis' support for undoing a plan for three proposed toll road corridors — a priority in 2019 of then-Senate President Bill Galvano. FL SB100 (21R), which DeSantis signed Thursday, repeals the "Multi-use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance" program establishing the Northern Turnpike Connector, the Southwest-Central Florida Connector and the Suncoast Parkway extension.

Light praise — Environmentalists praised the legislation for eliminating the M-CORES program but said it only fully repeals the Southwest-Central Florida Connector. "In total, the Governor's action falls woefully short of eliminating the original M-CORES threat and realizing the transportation needs of Florida," said a statement from the No Roads to Ruin Coalition, which includes the Sierra Club, Florida Conservation Voters and Florida Springs Council. The new state law now directs the Department of Transportation to build bypasses along U. S. Highway 19 in North Florida to replace to Suncoast Parkway extension.

JUMPING IN — “Covid-19 vaccine skeptic backs Florida’s social media crackdown,” by POLITICO’s Matt Dixon: Leo Goldstein, who runs a website that amplifies anti-Covid-19 vaccination information, including recent posts advocating for “halting” vaccines for kids, and promoting the “dangers” of vaccination, backed DeSantis and Republican legislative leaders' arguments in a brief filed Wednesday. Goldstein, who did not return a request seeking comment, has also been a persistent critic of social media companies. In 2019, he filed a failed federal lawsuit alleging Facebook was “aiding and abetting international terrorism.” His brief, filed in the U.S. District for the Northern District of Florida in Tallahassee, is peppered with unsupported claims that social media companies benefit from the pandemic

A CLOSER LOOK — “Five things to know about Florida’s new ‘intellectual diversity’ law,” by Tampa Bay Times Divya Kumar: “The bill signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis this week calling for 'intellectual diversity' on college campuses has attracted national attention, drawing criticism and support. And with an election year drawing near,

the debate surrounding the new law appears to have staying power. 'The reality is we're very focused on diversity as policy matter — and that's a good thing,' House Speaker Chris Sprowls, a Palm Harbor Republican, told the state Board of Governors this week."

...HURRICANE HOLE...

BUT SOMETIMES THERE ARE NO BETTER OPTIONS — “Should you drop your home insurer and go to state-owned Citizens?” by Sun Sentinel’s Ron

Hurtibise: "State-owned Citizens Property Insurance Corp. is becoming the go-to insurer for Florida homeowners besieged by high prices and wishy-washy private market property insurers. One day your insurance company wants you and offers you a great deal to sign up. The next day it's jacking up those rates, or declining to renew your policy. Who needs that? Citizens, owned by the state of Florida, can seem like a better choice. With rate hikes capped by state law at 10% annually, thousands of homeowners are making the switch. In fact, Citizens has grown rapidly since the third quarter of 2019, when it had 423,000 policies, to mid-June, when it tallied 626,607."

PENINSULA AND BEYOND

NOW SCANNING — “South Florida police quietly ran facial recognition scans to identify peaceful protesters. Is that legal?” by Sun Sentinel’s Joanne

Cavanaugh Simpson and Marc Freeman: “The South Florida Sun Sentinel and Pulitzer Center journalists used Florida’s public records law to access facial recognition searches local police ran as demonstrations cascaded across Broward and Palm Beach counties in May and June 2020. Those records revealed that at least three agencies — the Broward Sheriff’s Office and the Boca Raton and Fort Lauderdale police departments — submitted more than a dozen images that referenced protests or protesters, but no crimes.”

— **“Historical marker in Plaza de Luna reflects ‘evil’ of slavery. It is also a beacon of hope,” by Pensacola News Journal’s Dania Kalaji**

— **“Suspect accused of shooting Daytona police officer arrested, tied to militant group, DBPD says,” by Orlando Sentinel’s Katie Rice and Nelly Ontiveros**

A message from USA-IT:

The very things that make Florida such a wonderful place to live—a vibrant, populous state with 14 major ports, advanced transportation infrastructure, and of course world-famous beaches and shoreline (the 2nd longest in the United States)—also make it attractive to smugglers and traffickers. This illegal trade hurts local taxpayers, local economies and the senior citizen community, ultimately affecting the safety and quality of life of all 21 million Floridians.

Private-public partnerships can help address this problem. That's why our partners are proud to be on the ground in 2021, bringing our shared expertise combating illegal trade into Florida's fight. Along with governments and local law enforcement, we're working together to fight back.

ODDS, ENDS, AND FLORIDA MEN

— **“Killearn HOA asks couple to take down their Pride flag. Now neighbors are flying them too,” by Tallahassee Democrat’s Christopher Cann:** "Ahead of Pride month, [Josh] Carpenter hung up a Progressive Rainbow Pride Flag, which replaced the classic rainbow design last year, notably adding a black and brown stripe as well as the transgender stripes. Within a week, the couple was approached by a representative of the Killearn Homes Association, who asked them to take the flag down. ‘It was chilling to say the least,’ Carpenter said. ‘I felt unwelcome.’”

WEEKEND WEDDING — Austin Cantrell, a former Trump WH assistant press secretary who is now the founder of PR agency Cantrell Communications, Inc., on Saturday married **Sage Norberg**, a public school elementary special education teacher. The couple, who live in South Florida, wed in Belfast, Maine, after meeting on a flight from BWI over three years ago. They were married by their former D.C. roommate before 30 of their closest family and friends. ***Pic ... Another pic***

BIRTHDAYS: State Senate President **Wilton Simpson ... Brendan Farrington** with The Associated Press ... (Was Sunday) State Sen. **Lori Berman ...** former Rep. **Jeff Miller ... Simone Marstiller**, secretary of the Agency for Health Care Administration ... **Pat Roberts**, president and CEO of Florida Association of Broadcasters ... (Was Saturday) Florida first lady **Casey DeSantis ...** state Rep. **Dianne Hart ...** State Rep. **Mike**

Beltran ... state Rep. **Lawrence McClure** ... **Michael Bender** with The Wall Street Journal ... **Tami Fillyaw**, chief of staff at the Department of Management Services ... **Jessica Palombo**, editorial director at WJCT ... former Rep. **Pete Peterson** ... **Lydia Claire Brooks** with the Florida Justice Association

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