

# Opinion

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR  
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ANGELINE TAYLOR / LEON COUNTY

With a deadline clock counting down over their shoulders, citizens wrestle with a budget-balancing exercise at the March 15 Citizen Engagement Series workshop.

## Balancing a budget is no game — except this once

The other day, I balanced the county budget.

Well, not me alone. It was me and a roomful of people at the second get-together of the Leon County Citizen Engagement Series.

And it wasn't the actual budget. But over the course of about three hours, using playing cards and a game board, about 50 of us experienced the stress the county commissioners feel — minus, of course, the threat that we could lose our jobs over the decisions we were making.

The Citizen Engagement Series consists of six workshops put on by the county (the next one is in May, and you can sign up at <http://cms.leoncountyfl.gov/home>). The first session, in January, I must say was rather dry — more like a lecture, as they dragged us from the dawn of politics to the structure of county government today. If it had been a college course, I would have borrowed my roommate's notes.

But the second session was dandy. We got to play.

Creating a county budget doesn't seem as if it would be that difficult. I mean, pave my road, spray those nasty mosquitoes, keep the bad guys locked up — oh, and lower my taxes while you're at it.

I get the feeling that sort of simplistic thinking has been eating at the budget folks, because they came up with a simulation to capture the balancing act government performs every year.

The game board was printed on a map of Leon County. (A short side note, but did you know there was a Lake Erie in Leon County? It was in my corner of the map, distracting me for the whole game.)

In the middle of the map was what

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Mark Hohmeister  
Associate Editor

looked like a football gridiron, with the yardage markers being dollar amounts — a surplus or deficit against a balanced budget.

Each player got an identical deck of cards holding all sorts of possibilities, from imposing user fees at baseball fields (add a dollar or two to revenue) to cutting social services or library hours (save a dollar or two in expenses).

Each table had five to seven people, and each acted as its own County Commission. We rolled the dice to choose a chair, then one at a time, each player would choose an option — more revenue or reduced expenses. If it was seconded, we discussed it, then voted on it. If it passed, we would move our marker one notch closer to — or farther from — a balanced budget.

I was amazed at how quickly I started to think like a politician. One option was the 5-cent gasoline tax, and I quickly shuffled that to the bottom of my deck. I wanted to live to play another day.

I also was amazed at how quickly I was willing to slash programs that mean so much to people. Charge a fee for mosquito control? Well, OK, maybe. But after a few trips around the table and seeing our marker stuck in a deficit, suddenly eliminating the entire mosquito control program wasn't so outrageous.

My table was lucky enough to include a genuine county commissioner, Nick Maddox. Since it was only a game, I didn't record every vote he took. But he impressed me with his patience in explaining the processes, his understand-

ing of what each card meant, and mostly his willingness to look for new revenue and cut programs that surely would bring howls of protest.

Several times, Maddox stressed the difference between the practical and the political. He mentioned how in any budget discussion, you have to take into account which commissioners are up for re-election. Just to pull an example out of thin air, if Jane Sauls is facing a challenger, don't go to her looking for a vote to cut a service that's valued out on State Road 20.

Just about the time our little marker was closing in on a balanced budget, a bell would ring, heralding an announcement: A tropical storm has caused damage throughout the county, or the state has just passed down another unfunded mandate. Move that marker two more lines into the red. Aaargh!

In the end, we balanced the budget with some cuts and some fee hikes. Oh, and we passed the 5-cent gasoline tax! All eight tables reduced the hours at rural waste service centers (a staffer observed that the results would have been different had the game been played in Miccosukee). Other popular options around the room were the gas tax, fees at playing fields, delaying Tharpe Street construction and cutting mosquito control.

County Administrator Vince Long said he heard one player laugh afterward: "I wouldn't be a county commissioner for all the money in the world."

The county may copyright the game, and it's likely to show up again with groups such as Leadership Tallahassee.

If you get a chance, roll the dice and give it a try. It will give you new respect for what our officials do. And may wreck any chances you have of being elected.

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## Zing!

Readers' opinions stated succinctly

- So FSU can buy the Civic Center. How much more will tuition have to go up to pay for that?
- At Florida State, STEM stands for sports, tuition, encroachment and money.
- Whenever I see in the obituaries where a child has died, especially one from an illness, my heart goes out to the family and my problems are no longer significant.
- Clone Cotterell, please.
- Better an Etch A Sketch than a right-wing wretch.
- Elderly woman arrested for cruelty to cats ... no arrest for shooting an unarmed 17-year-old human.
- The actual nine most terrifying words in the English language: I'm a Republican and I'm here to fix Medicare.
- Last year, great excitement at the reported sighting of an ivory billed woodpecker in Arkansas. This week, I saw a fox squirrel near Woodville! Will wonders never cease?
- Legislators require students to pass tests to prove they understand a subject. Why shouldn't legislators have to pass tests before voting on bills?
- At least call it by its full name: "ObamaCare and RepublicansDon'tCare."
- How about an extra large turtle tunnel down the length of Tennessee Street? We might even get federal funding. Look out, Underground Atlanta, here we come!
- With the money Tallahassee has wasted on PIs, they could have bought enough waste receptacle drones to patrol the whole city.
- It would be nice if the proponents and opponents of current nuclear power plants realized that there are viable alternatives like the thorium-based molten salt reactor and stopped discussing past technology.

— *Somebody needs to work on his Zing!iness. Email [zing@tallahassee.com](mailto:zing@tallahassee.com) or write P.O. Box 990, Tallahassee, FL 32302. And be sure to check out the Zing! blog at [Tallahassee.com](http://Tallahassee.com) or on Twitter at @zinginbox.*

## Another conference won't save black babies

White women typically have the opportunity to watch their infants grow up. Black women far too often have the opportunity to come to conferences such as the Year of the Healthy Infant, where people considered to be experts try to explain to them why their infants have died.

The first Year of the Healthy Infant conference was in response to black infants dying at a rate of 15 per 1,000 live births in 2006, compared with the white rate of 4 deaths per 1,000 live births. The conference was met with great hope and fanfare. We all felt better. But it accomplished virtually nothing.

Women continue to march around Lake Ella with their candles to commemorate the deaths of

their infants, who are disproportionately black.

Meanwhile, in November 2010, Florida joined the ranks of Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana in getting a grade of F from the March of Dimes for the contempt it shows to its poor children.

When former Department of Health epidemiologist Bill Sappenfield looked at the black infant mortality rate in Leon County, he found that there had been no statistically significant improvement in 20 years. The meager efforts by city, county and state agencies have not worked.

Medicaid in the state of Florida is so dysfunctional that it is considered by some to be a risk factor for black infant mortality. In 2008, 42 percent of the births in Leon County were Medicaid births. This means that Medicaid must share the blame for the awful outcomes.

A pregnant woman in Florida is banished from the Medicaid rolls only 60

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days after she delivers her baby. Thus, a sick mother is expected to be able to care for her infant child.

Florida ranks dead last in the nation in providing dental care for poor children, according to a study by the Pew Center published in 2011. The study showed that only 23.5 percent of Medicaid-enrolled children 18 and under received any kind of dental care in 2008.

The Medicaid reimbursement rate for dentists is so low that one can only conclude that the program was designed for failure. Few dentists participate. Children suffer from decaying, painful teeth as a consequence.

In 2004, more than 500,000 Medicaid-enrolled children received no preventive health care at all.

In 2005, the Florida Legislature returned \$20 mil-

lion to the federal government rather than spend it on KidCare. The state had to pay only 21 cents on the dollar; the other 79 cents would have been matched by the federal government.

In 2007, 390,000 Medicaid children received no medical checkups, and 750,000 received no dental care.

In 2009, 20.7 percent of children 18 or younger lived in poverty in Leon County.

As of December 2010, more than 700,000 children in Florida had no health insurance.

In a 2011 report published by the Commonwealth Fund, Florida had the highest percentage of uninsured black children in the country, at more than 20 percent.

After the recently concluded legislative session, Florida will leave unused a half-billion dollars of federal money that could have been spent on the health-care needs of the poor. One program that will suf-

fer as a consequence was designed to help single mothers deliver and nurture healthy babies.

Maternal mortality is also a problem. Between 2008 and 2010, three black women in Leon County died in childbirth. No white women died in childbirth during the same period. For the state as a whole, the black maternal mortality rate was 37.1 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared with 15.4 deaths per 100,000 live births for white women.

In 2006, the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce fought to the bitter end to kill the half-cent sales tax that would have provided Leon County with \$18 million a year for health care for the poor.

Moral arguments for change are not persuasive in a political environment in which there is no morality. Only political power is respected. Present strategies for addressing the problem of high black infant mortality are not

working.

In 2010, the black infant mortality rate in Leon County of 18.3 deaths per 1,000 live births was nearly six times the white infant rate of 3.1. This is a health-care emergency, and it should be treated as such. In response, the county has sponsored yet another Year of the Healthy Infant conference.

Given the fact that the value of black life in Leon County continues to be discounted, I suspect that the long-term results of this Year of the Healthy Infant conference will be just as dismal as the first one.

Many black people have lost faith that state or local governments will ever take effective measures to eliminate the disparities in health care. We need to consider appeals to outside entities such as the United Nations and Amnesty International, seeking their assistance regarding the obscenely high rates of black infant death in Leon County.