



Leon County

Board of County Commissioners

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MY VIEW

The Black Swan: The Rarest of Birds in Tallahassee

Vincent S. Long, Leon County Administrator

(Re: "Backing off: County dumps three big proposals," Our Opinion, May 30)

The Tallahassee Democrat's editorial questioning the "backbone" of Leon County Commissioners for listening to their constituents and electing *not* to impose certain new taxes and fees was such a surprising departure from most editorializing that I felt the need to respond.

The newspaper more commonly saves its harshest criticism for government not engaging in meaningful dialog with citizens, or being too quick to spend other people's money without considering the effect their fiscal policies have at the kitchen table level of the people they serve.

While surprising, this was an understandable misreading by the editorial board, created I assume by the rare sighting of a Black Swan in Tallahassee.

That is, an event so rare in the eyes of the observer that it's rejected for what it is and rationalized as something else altogether. Like the sight of a black swan, a glimpse of government doing what it is suppose to do may seem so rare to those who cover politics in Tallahassee that it is presumed not to exist. This is unfortunate.

The Board of County Commissioners had at a well-populated public hearing Tuesday night, many policy decisions before them in the development of the FY 2014 Budget, specifically those regarding stormwater and solid waste services and a local gas tax for transportation needs.

However, prior to and as part of their deliberations, the Board conducted three community meetings to get public reaction to these. General revenues subsidies to these funds have increased in recent years as tax revenues fell and costs increased.

Like any household budget, the County's budget reflects changes in economic conditions, for certain, but also the realities of previous decisions about spending, reducing services and the use of "rainy day" funds. None of the conditions leading to the proposals for fee increases or a county gas tax were created overnight. Indeed some have lingered for as many as 20 years unresolved.

The County budget reflects a deliberate, necessary and reasoned focus on providing tax relief to citizens during an unprecedented economic decline. When property values

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dropped 20 percent and home values went upside down, Leon County responded with \$14 million in property tax relief, reduced the budget by \$62 million and eliminated 75 positions. The County also did not raise the fees associated with these “enterprise funds” – stormwater and solid waste management – by correspondingly increasing property tax rates over this time.

At the same time, when unemployment rose dramatically and our construction workers were desperate for work, the County created jobs when they were needed most and advanced essential infrastructure projects when the costs were most affordable to the taxpayer. We utilized our cash reserves and created over 800 construction related jobs.

During this time, Leon County fundamentally restructured how priorities are evaluated. Your County government has embraced technology to reduce costs, advanced innovations, leveraged community partnerships, and privatized when appropriate. Nor have we overlooked the smallest cost savings – such as eliminating a contract to tend greenery throughout the Courthouse.

During the slow economic recovery, the County Commission is poised to take the same deliberate, necessary and reasoned approach to ensuring the long-term fiscal viability as they did during the economic decline by ensuring the greatest affordability of County services.

In fact, Commissioners are actively doing both. While there is never a good time to raise fees or taxes, the County’s newly renegotiated rates on subscription garbage-collection services will save all subscribers in the unincorporated area 32 percent or \$73 dollars a year. The timing of these savings was intended to soften any increases resulting from universal collection (for current nonsubscribers) or increases to stormwater fees or gas taxes.

The editorial correctly points out that the Board decided not to impose universal garbage collection – largely due to those community meetings; not for any lack of backbone. After hearing from countless citizens about the value they derive from the County’s rural waste service centers, including recycling inducements, the Board decided to leave these “roll-off” sites open, but directed staff to develop a modest fee for this service.

Regrettably the editorial failed to recognize that the Board addressed the biggest general revenue subsidy of all in the stormwater fee, which had not been touched since 1994. This fee helps address the necessity throughout the county of controlling flooding and erosion and ultimately ensuring clean water for drinking and recreation.

Finally, while the Board decided against increasing the gas tax, it was an informed decision, recognizing again that these budgetary issues were not created overnight and do not have to be solved overnight. Rather these issues are better served by a deliberate, necessary and reasoned approach – in other words, by that rare Tallahassee Black Swan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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