

Preparing for a Property Tax Revenue Cliff



Using a structured, sequenced framework to address the hard realities and facilitate the difficult decisions

A peer resource — counties helping counties in the interest of the communities we serve.

A note from the Leon County Administrator

To our fellow Florida counties:

Let's be direct: the proposed amendment jeopardizes essential services our residents rely on every day, including public safety, roads, parks, libraries, and all that makes our communities more than a list of mandates. If passed, the budget shortfalls will be severe, and the limitations imposed on our County Commissions to mitigate the impacts will be extreme. When the primary revenue source for counties is stripped away, without replacement, so is our ability to serve our communities. We should all be very clear and transparent with the people we serve, that a historic change to our fundamental funding structure may very well result in a historic change to the very role and function of county government.

We in Florida county government are adept at preparing for the most devastating storms and protecting our communities from the worst repercussions on the ground. That same level of detail, expertise and execution will be required of us as we prepare for the hard fiscal realities and difficult service-level decisions

we may face. Just like any emergency of this magnitude, we must plan as if it is coming.

The strength of Florida's counties has always been collective. It's with that in mind that I share some of the essential elements of the strategic framework we intend to use in Leon County to best position ourselves for this challenge over the current and upcoming budget cycles. Because the number and variety of fiscal strategies and processes can be overwhelming, and no county government should have to start from scratch, we hope this helps. It is intended to serve as a guide to address our shared financial and structural characteristics, while providing flexibility to address unique community and organizational differences. I hope you find it helpful in the times ahead.

In Service,

Vincent S. Long, Leon County Administrator

What we're facing

The proposed "Save Our Homes from Excessive Property Taxes" amendment (Nov. 2026 ballot) raises the homestead exemption to \$150,000 (2027) and \$250,000 (2028) and tightens the non-homestead assessment cap from 10% to 5%. Statewide, the reduction to non-school local governments is estimated at \$4.6 billion initially, growing to \$8.4 billion at maturity. Where property taxes fund half or more of a county's operating budget, the answer cannot be uncoordinated cuts — it must be a sequenced, multi-year transition anchored in national best practices and GFOA's recognized Fiscal First Aid model: Bridge → Reform → Transform, executed through six tactical phases. Each phase builds on the next.



The six-phase sequence

Phase 1 – Cash Insulation & Stabilization ► [BRIDGE · IMMEDIATELY](#)

Centralized hiring freeze (every requisition justified); freeze discretionary spending (travel, training, non-critical technology, consulting); sweep open encumbrances and defer undelivered orders; suspend ad-valorem-funded capital not under binding contract; shield reserves from masking a structural deficit.

Phase 2 – Diagnostic Modeling & Target Identification ► [BRIDGE · BEFORE THE VOTE](#)

Parcel-by-parcel exemption simulations with the Property Appraiser; map and isolate mandatory obligations (constitutional officers, courts, Medicaid match) from discretionary; cost every individual program fully burdened (this informs Phase 4); model how non-property-tax revenues respond to the economy.

Phase 3 – Immediate Offsets & Revenue Optimization ► [REFORM · MAXIMIZE BEFORE CUTTING](#)

Closely evaluate pulling every non-ad-valorem lever before reducing service: user-fee cost-recovery audits; move subsidized enterprise funds toward self-sufficiency; evaluate assessment transitions (stormwater, fire, solid waste); evaluate millage rebalancing as a board budgetary consideration.

Phase 4 – Structural Tiering & Priority-Based Budgeting ► [REFORM · THE PIVOT](#)

Rank every program by score, not asserted value. Build a program inventory; score on mandate, reliance, cost recovery, demand, population served; assign tiers. Departments score their own programs; a peer-review panel normalizes. Deliverable: a full tier map the board can work from.

Phase 5 – Organizational & Structural Redesign ► [TRANSFORM · PERMANENT FIT](#)

Flatten span of control and consolidate departments into unified divisions; pursue shared-services interlocals (HR, IT, purchasing, fleet) across the board, constitutional offices, school board and municipalities; monetize underused land, buildings and facility space.

Phase 6 – Service Dissolution & Alternative Delivery ► [TRANSFORM · LAST RESORT, BOARD-DIRECTED](#)

Only if Phases 1–5 leave a residual gap: devolve unincorporated-area services to cities or neighborhood MSTUs; outsource scalable functions; transfer assets to nonprofit or private operators via long-term agreements. Publish this phase as part of the full sequence — credibility comes from showing the whole map — but state plainly nothing moves without board direction.



Service tiers — the Phase 4 backbone

Tier 1 – Core & Mandated	Public safety, life-safety, core infrastructure, constitutional and statutory obligations. Protected; reduced only as a last resort.
Tier 2 – Essential, Non-Mandated	Road/stormwater maintenance, facilities upkeep, core operations. Efficiency reductions first — but deferred maintenance is a trap: every \$1 deferred grows to \$4–6 later.
Tier 3 – Quality-of-Life Discretionary	Libraries, parks, cultural programs, outside-agency funding. First exposed — but discretionary is not disposable. Where the county is the sole provider (the “reliance” score), eliminating a service erases it rather than shifting the burden elsewhere. Score it honestly.

The calendar runs regardless of the vote

Budget season does not pause for an election. Certify tentative millage in summer; TRIM notices mail in August (counties cannot insert messaging — §200.069 — but should anticipate the questions); public hearings and adoption in September; fiscal year opens Oct. 1 with Bridge measures live; election in November. If the amendment passes, exemption impacts hit the January 2027 roll, so the first revenue hit lands in the following fiscal year’s budget — that gap is the planning runway. Work the tier map at a post-election board retreat. Run the tracks concurrently, not in sequence: diagnostic/ tiering, staffing transition, revenue alternatives, reserves strategy, community engagement, communications.

Workforce: manage positions to protect people

Workforce is the largest cost and the slowest lever — start earliest. Use vacancy management as the primary tool (attrition creates room to redeploy staff into protected functions); consider voluntary separation incentives before any involuntary measure; route every vacancy through a tier-map review. Engage constitutional officers early — where they hold most property tax dollars, the framework’s credibility depends on their visible participation.

Community engagement: focused and intentional

Engagement should be designed for impact, not volume — a few well-built touchpoints placed where they can change the outcome beat a broad, shallow campaign, and well-designed input earns more trust than a longer list of meetings. Give the public common facts (the figures the board sees), hold real conversations (small facilitated groups over large hearings), and force real trade-offs (an online tool where residents allocate the actual discretionary dollars). Begin before the election as part of the normal budget conversation — scoped to discretionary spending and the county’s own priorities, never to the ballot question — then ramp up if the amendment passes and the trade-offs become real. Close the loop by publishing “what we heard and what changed.”

Guardrails — apply across all six phases

Guardrail	Why it matters
No across-the-board cuts.	They hollow an organization evenly instead of choosing wisely. Targeted, tier-informed reductions only.
Protect the capacity that saves money.	Procurement, grants administration and the efficiency culture itself pay for themselves — cutting them is false economy.
Maintain credit posture.	Reserve policy, debt capacity and a rating-agency communication plan. Operating near a tax cap already pressures revenue flexibility.
Transparency.	Publish the tier map and program inventory — residents see the same analysis the board sees.
Neutrality through the election (§106.113).	Contingency planning, not campaign material. Keep the line bright.

Grounded in GFOA Fiscal First Aid and priority-based budgeting, ICMA cutback-management guidance and NACo’s ‘Strategies for Balancing the Budget,’ adapted from financial-recovery practice to anticipatory planning. Offered as a peer resource; each county should adapt to its own charter, revenue mix and legal review.