

County Manager's Response to the



Blue Ribbon Committee Recommendations

July 12, 2005

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At the April 26, 2005 County Commission meeting the County Manager's Office was requested to respond to the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Committee on County Finance. The committee is to be commended for their arduous efforts and careful study of Alachua County finances and operations. It is particularly noteworthy that the committee was extremely representative of the broad constituencies of citizens in Alachua County.

As County Manager the response to these recommendations is rendered with respect for the difficulties any citizens group has in fully understanding the complexities of County government and operations. Due to these complexities, the fact that the committee's recommendations tend to be broad and lack specific content is understandable. However, this also limits the effectiveness of their recommendations to be analyzed beyond general application.

As a believer in representative government I am also acutely aware that those holding elected office as representatives of the entire community have a far more difficult time in balancing the conflicting needs and goals of the public, than an ad hoc committee which will not be held responsible for the specific impacts of their recommendations. Research by University of Kansas Professor John Nalbandian, Ph.D., a former Mayor and Commissioner in Lawrence, Kansas, indicates decisions of a local government body in the United States can never be only concerned with efficiency, but must include consideration of the values of representation, equity, individual rights and the general quality of life which exists in the community in addition to efficiency.

Committee Recommendations with Proposed Actions and Commentary

1. Alachua County Government should be run like a business. It should refine its intermediate term financial planning and consistently implement it in order to build citizen confidence.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit. Our continuing transformation effort, which in business is discussed in terms such as continuous improvement, is ongoing in our organization. Business-like techniques can be expanded or enhanced and we are doing so with each budget year.

Commentary

As I indicated in my presentation to the committee, I believe our goal should be to run government using business-like techniques whenever possible to provide

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efficient and effective programs. The county government is not a business and was never intended to be a business. It is a government. Our residents or citizens maybe referred to as customers, as we are a service institution. To be a citizen is to be greater than a customer or a client.

Government is an institution created to both provide services to citizens that they cannot provide themselves and regulate behaviors that are harmful to the community. Unlike a for profit business, many of the county's programs and expenses are mandated by the state legislature or federal government and we are in those businesses whether we want to be or not. Our mission looks beyond the focused profit motives of a private business to how we can better assist individuals in need in our community on a daily basis or invest in their long-term wellbeing.

The County Commission, as elected representatives of the citizens of Alachua County, define the level and scope of services that are provided by our County Government. The County organization functions and exists in a representative democracy where the appropriate "role" is defined by elected officials based on policy and law. Every Commission will envision and want to implement its own programs to benefit the community or the constituency they wish to address.

Our staff can run efficient programs to the degree our governmental systems allow. However, non-governmental people may not recognize that there is a deliberate redundancy and a series of checks and balances in county government. The historical intent of the separation of powers among Constitutional Officers and the County Commission was to diffuse power and decentralize authority. Finally, the more important question for county government in my opinion is not efficiency; it is the effectiveness of our programs. We can be very efficient at doing things significant portions of our constituents do not believe we should be doing at all. We cannot do all things for all people.

In an earlier work on reforming government, entitled The Reconstruction of the Republic, Harold Brown pointed out the difficulties that elected officials have in limiting what they provide for the public. He stated that:

"Unless we control our appetites, we cannot control our government. We certainly cannot expect it to limit itself, because it senses our appetites far more strongly than it is persuaded by our claims that we are tired of bureaucracy, taxes and government influence. If the ultimate goal of government is to 'do everything and change everything,' is really an infinite challenge, then it will require an infinite effort—in fact, infinite taxes, infinite paperwork and infinite interference: infinite in the sense that there will be no limit to them, no place at which people will say, 'This is clearly all that we want or need,' until the limits of exhaustion are reached."

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I have always felt this was an excellent quote, because at virtually every Commission meeting well-meaning citizens, special interests and other agencies, including governmental and nonprofits, come seeking funding for whatever they perceive as being a benefit to the community. This situation is inherent in government.

With this natural pressure to spend the critical question for the Commission is in my opinion, the question, "what businesses should we be in and what businesses should we not be in?" This is the central decision of policy makers who must provide services to a community. Through our fiscal policies, the Commission should self impose appropriate limits on expenditure requests and insist staff maintain a legitimate process for allocating and appropriating funding between proposed priorities.

Alachua County government, including our Constitutional Officers, have advanced on many fronts in more business-like techniques, technology enhancements, performance based budgeting and Web site and e-government applications. The increasing quality and utilization of information contained within our geographic information systems is an excellent example of a successful business-like operation. The operations of our Fleet Management Division would compete with any private sector fleet management operation.

2. The County Commission should not increase or add taxes until it has demonstrated its ability to govern at a lower cost and higher level of efficiency.

Implementation Action

The County is not recommending a millage rate increase in FY 06 or FY 07 at this time.

Commentary

This is a wonderful general statement; however it neglects to define how we are to demonstrate our ability to govern at a lower cost and higher efficiency. The County Commission is the body that determines if there is an effective level of efficiency and enacts or requests new programs except for mandated actions of the state or federal governments. We are, in this budget, implementing a higher level of performance reporting, which is trying to align what the County Commission tells us we need to be doing, with performance measures related to what we are accomplishing and appropriate levels of service.

Key indicators of performance for the County Government could be enacted by the County Commission based on their values to indicate or measure a Commission's success. These could be such things as the quality of our bond

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rating, number of employees per 1,000 people, satisfaction survey results of citizens using our services, et cetera.

3. Alachua County Government should reduce expenditures by 5% through outsourcing, implementing new technology, eliminating duplicate functions, consolidating services or any other strategy that will achieve an overall goal of a 5% expenditure reduction. This may also provide a bondable source of revenue.

Implementation Action

There is no justification provided for a 5% decrease in all funds, nor would all funds be appropriate to be decreased as a means of arriving at a total. The shift of expenditures over a time towards infrastructure and maintenance is worthy but it is far more likely to be successful by the direction of growth in revenues for these purposes not reductions in existing budgets. This technique would allow for bonding without disrupting existing programs.

Commentary

A 5% reduction of the countywide adopted budget would be approximately \$13 million. It is unrealistic to use that figure for reduction, as it covers funds that cannot be reduced such as debt service, self insurance and enterprise funds which are set-up to run like a business funding a specific service. If one were to use the more realistic figure of 5% of the operating budget, the reduction would be \$6 million. The use of outsourcing, implementation of new technology, eliminating duplicate functions, consolidating services and other such strategies all should be routinely examined each budget year. These should be implemented where appropriate and used in order to deal with the increased costs of existing services.

Many of the county departments and constitutional offices have been operating at a "base level" budget for the past 5 years. In addition, the general operating budget was reduced by approximately 15% in FY04 with little credit given to those departments cutting back. Many FY 06 and FY 07 budget requests are to replace these cuts which impacted our services.

Alachua County has likewise maintained the same millage rate from year to year in recent years. I am not recommending nor anticipating in FY 06 and FY 07 tax increases in the General Fund or MSTU, and have been requested by the Commission to explore alternatives before doing so. In our budget discussion for the upcoming year the County Commission has requested that there be no reductions in Social Service Programs or Court Service Programs. In fact the Commission recently approved a Social Services Master Plan that outlines higher expenditures based on the dramatic level of poverty and need identified in our community.

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We have already embarked on additional road maintenance funding including issuing bonds committing existing streams of revenue. Even in our discussions of reducing criminal justice expenditures, it is not the Commission's goal or direction to the Manager to reduce taxes, but to transfer these funds to preventative programs such as drug treatment and recreation.

The role of Alachua County government affects our expenditures. It is recognized that the new Comprehensive Plan and LDR's will require additional staffing if we are to enforce development requirements and streamline these processes to improve customer service. The county has contributed extensively to countywide planning and consensus building efforts to improve programs such as indigent health care and homeless.

There will always be individuals who dislike their tax monies being spent for individual programs. This organization has already made cuts to programs and has never been viewed as extravagant in its aggregate spending in comparison to other peer counties.

The Blue Ribbon Finance Committee had a lack of consensus itself on which programs to reduce and whose services should be cut, a problem which will persist for the Commission and the Constitutional Officers. The report did not address nor suggest the consequences to programs or services of a \$13 million reduction in funding.

Consolidation is not an option the County controls, and it is not assured to reduce costs. The recent Fire Master Plan indicated little immediate savings from consolidation of services in the short-term. In practice, a crisis or scandal is more likely to alter the functional structure of government rather than a voluntary change. The Jacksonville model was not undertaken purely for better government reasons; it was motivated by scandal and social issues of the time.

4. The County Commission should initiate a citizens' study committee to study the long-range structure of government with respect to who pays, who receives, and who delivers and if needed, hire a consultant to assist in the study.

Implementation Action

This task is likely too complex for a citizen's committee and will require much additional staff time. It is my understanding where such committees are utilized they typically are drawn from corporate leaders who are able to utilize corporate resources such as their own fiscal accounting staffs, process reengineering professionals, information technology experts or communications professionals to assist local government's capacity to examine these issues. A series of smaller studies performed by a consultant on issues such as the impact of the

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university on the community might provide targeted information of use in analyzing issues of taxation, poverty and policy making.

Commentary

Without clear Board direction and support politically, financially and morally, any citizen committee could spend months, if not years, debating with Constitutional Officers, municipalities and citizens the delivery of and payment for services.

In the 'off-year' of our biennial budget process, the Commission should consider looking at our individual departments on a rotating basis. All programs, revenues and expenditures could be examined for effectiveness, efficiency and appropriate service levels using business-like techniques and methods. Scheduling departments in a rotation could foster stability and clarify expectations allowing for more detailed long-term planning in departments.

5. The County Commission should, over an intermediate timeframe, transfer the functions, obligations, and costs of urban services to municipalities because additional municipal annexations of unincorporated areas are likely, and historically in such annexations, County revenues decrease more than expenses.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit. An additional approach not emphasized is a focused community dialogue on what are appropriate countywide or regional services. Small cities may not have the capacity for this type of service provision for decades.

Commentary

This recommendation reflects the ongoing discussion and vision of a majority of the County Commission. The recommendation is on the whole made simplistic by the fact that all municipalities cannot fund the services we might transfer to them and should they not provide the service, it is difficult for a County Commissioner to abandon citizens who are county residents without essential services. In the case of fire and law enforcement someone has to respond. We have sent the City of Gainesville and all other municipalities a draft annexation agreement which deals with the transition of facilities and services. As soon as possible if the Commission wishes to withdraw from services, it is advisable to send out letters announcing this decision a year or more in advance or phase the service reductions to allow municipalities time to adjust their budget and program priorities accordingly.

The County cannot be left with a remnant of unincorporated area that cannot finance urban services. Currently we are providing municipal type service to

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municipalities that cannot afford to provide themselves (fire and law enforcement). From the taxpayers' perspective, they will foot the bill whether services are paid for by municipalities or through the County. Recognizing this fact, the real question may be not one of jurisdiction, but who can provide the appropriate level of service at the lowest cost.

6. Once the BCC has demonstrated its ability to operate at a lower cost and higher level of efficiency, then it should take the necessary steps to assure a diversification of revenues and funding options.

Implementation Action

The County Commission has the authority to diversify revenues through additional gasoline tax, higher impact fees and increased discretionary fees and charges. A one-cent sales tax is also possible by referendum.

Commentary

This recommendation is once again very general. I think it is important to recognize that the county has limited organizational and fiscal capacity and continues to be requested to expand services. We agree with the committee that we should operate as efficiently as possible.

The County Commission since 2000 has articulated the need to diversify revenues. The County has already implemented Impact Fees and continues to lobby the state and federal legislatures for additional funding. The Local Optional Sales Tax and additional nickel of Gas Tax are standing recommendations of the County Manager, and await the board's willingness to implement or request in another referendum citizens to do so. This has been recognized in the prior Blue Ribbon reviews of county finances and remains an option today. To quote Chair Chestnut's state of the County address:

"It is ironic that today that as I stand here 16 years later (after Commissioner Tom Coward's speech) we are faced with the same challenges. In the past year we have seen the defeat of the Better Parks Better Roads referendum that would have corrected some of our historical infrastructure and road problems. Our tax base remains too narrow. We still need to diversify our tax base... Perhaps more tragic is that there does not appear to be a broad base consensus on how to resolve these issues or summon the courage to deal with them effectively as a community."

6.1 If after achieving lowered costs of operation including the 5% reduction identified above, revenues are insufficient to meet the reduced expenditures the following long term funding sources may be considered:

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6.2 Up to 5 cents of the "1 to 5 Cents Local Option Fuel Tax".

Implementation Action

Consider adoption of the additional 5 cents of gasoline taxes, as utilized in many of our peer counties.

Commentary

Gas tax is standing recommendation. The BOCC can levy by either super-majority vote of the commission or receiving a majority in a countywide referendum on the ballot. The additional 5 cents would be shared with the municipalities and could generate approximately \$6 million countywide. Uses are restricted to the operation, maintenance and capital improvements related to transportation. Municipalities must receive a share.

6.3 Up to 1 cent of the Local Government Infrastructure Surtax.

Implementation Action

Consider adoption of the additional one-cent optional infrastructure sales tax, as utilized in many of our peer counties.

Commentary

The local optional sales tax is the single most viable option for improving the structural problems associated with the deficiencies dealing with infrastructure including roads, parks, public facilities and other capital needs. I believe it is a key to the future quality of Alachua County. Deteriorating infrastructure and higher maintenance costs will inevitably place a greater burden on ad valorem taxes. A sales tax may be implemented by a majority of voters in an open countywide election. Each cent of a sales tax could generate in excess of \$30 million. The most recent Better Parks Better Roads initiatives failed by very slim margins and should be attempted again as soon as politically feasible. Uses are restricted and municipal sharing agreements would be necessary so continued intergovernmental cooperation is essential. I believe the sales tax is important enough to stand alone on a future special election ballot.

6.4 A food and beverage tax on all food and beverage prepared for sale in Alachua County bars and restaurants.

Implementation Action

The Board of County Commissioners may direct the County to place this in our legislative policy to change the Statute.

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Commentary

Alachua County does not currently meet the eligibility requirements in the Statute. Section 212.0306 of the Florida Statutes establishes the criteria for imposing the Local Option Food and Beverage Taxes - only Monroe, Miami-Dade and Hillsborough County are currently eligible. It is based on these three counties being the only ones that were charter counties when the Florida Constitution was adopted in 1885.

In addition, the revenues are generated from two different taxes and are for very specific purposes. The eligible counties can impose a two percent tax on the sale of food, beverages and alcoholic beverages sold in hotels and motels. The revenue can only be used for promoting the county and municipalities as a destination site for conventions, trade shows and pleasure travel. The eligible counties can impose a one percent tax on the sale of food, beverages, and alcoholic beverages in establishments other than hotels and motels. The revenue can only be used for homelessness programs and to construct and operate domestic violence centers.

6.5 A reduction in the ad valorem tax rate as revenue sources are diversified and expenditures are controlled.

Implementation Action

Examine after the Commission is satisfied that expenditures are under control and revenue sources are diversified as identified in your Guiding Vision since 2000.

Commentary

Currently, one mill of ad valorem tax generates approximately \$8.5 million of revenue. Reducing our millage rate would have a significant impact on the general operations which are already experiencing service level reductions. The diversification of revenue could allow a reduction in the millage rate, however it should be pointed out that revenue sources are restricted in their use. If there is a direct relationship between the expenditure paid by ad valorem and the replacement by the new revenue as a source of funding this can be accomplished. However, new buildings and park facilities require maintenance and staffing and those expenditures typically fall upon the General Fund.

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6.6 State payments to local governments in lieu of taxes for all state properties. A similar concept is in place in New Haven, CT.

Implementation Action

The Board of County Commissioners may direct that this be placed into our legislative policy to change the Statute to permit and fund this without harming the University of Florida, Shands or other public community assets.

Commentary

In 2000, the County Manager's Office of Alachua County contacted the Florida League of Cities, the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida City/County Management Association to discuss the creation of a movement to get this 'in lieu of tax' concept into legislation. At that time, it was generally felt that it was highly unlikely that the State Legislature would support this legislation and that it was an inappropriate time to bring the subject up to the State Legislature.

In the case of Alachua County this could be a double-edged sword. Counties with universities received the concept well, but there was a fear that the Legislature could pull the money from the budgets of state universities and other state agencies funding county projects such as FDOT. Counties may be concerned that municipalities would then request in lieu of tax payment for County facilities located in their community. Environmentalists may be concerned that the purchase of environmental lands by cities, counties or state government would require in lieu of tax payments. These threats make this a complicated legislative issue.

Most counties with universities are Charter Counties which have also diversified their tax structure to capture university generated revenues through optional sales tax. Alachua County should be prepared to answer the question by legislators as to why we have not taken advantage of the tax options we have. The Legislature would have to budget funds and enact legislation creating the program and formula for payment.

In addition, a provision could make it applicable to counties with a significant percentage of property off the tax rolls.

6.7 New enterprise endeavors as well as expanding existing enterprise endeavors if feasible.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit and is something we can examine each budget year based on our fiscal policies and the Commission's willingness to charge

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necessary fees to cover costs of these specific operations within the Enterprise Fund or Internal Service Funds.

Commentary

This recommendation is something we can look at each budget year. The practicality of creating enterprise funds really depends upon the service being provided and the client or user base. Fleet, Solid Waste and Codes Enforcement are already Enterprise Funds and others may be established based on the willingness to charge others for services and to recapture costs through our fee structures. An expansive fee philosophy, such as those used in Oregon, could see large portions of the Growth Management Department paid for with fees from development. I do not foresee the development community agreeing to that proposal. Anything set up on an enterprise basis, if we are going to be business-like, needs to recognize that a declining customer base will result in declining revenues and personnel reductions.

Fundamental to this discussion is simply trying to encourage a more "entrepreneurial service" mindset where departments are willing to develop outside customers for the services they render. These services could theoretically include services as diverse as grant-writing, organizational training, video production, paving, landscaping or technological services.

The downside to this approach is that we could be accused with competing with private sector and criticized for charging other agencies for services that we as a tax supported agency should provide for free. Sometimes to have an entrepreneurial mindset the Commission would have to spend money up-front in order to allow the enterprise operation to have the resources and equipment to market their services.

7. The County Commission should pursue a vigorous policy of transferring urban services to the appropriate municipalities.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has been addressed in preceding actions and requires the Commission identify what service are urban services.

Commentary

This recommendation has been address in this response. If the Board of County Commissioners continues to believe in this policy, such transfers could be done through interlocal agreement. In the case of annexation the transition agreement is vital as the County loses revenue in major annexations that support General Fund as well as MSTU operations.

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Board policy needs to be clear on defining our role related to providing urban services. We currently do not have a commission definition of urban services. Transferring the services we are currently providing to municipalities could ease the strain on the MSTU and General Fund. However, many of the small cities simply cannot pay the cost of many of these services and, as elected officials, the County Commission is hard pressed not to provide services of a basic nature such as public safety and emergency services.

In other cases such as Animal Services, we provide countywide service because it avoids duplication of animal shelters and multiple patrolling agencies. The only mandated requirement for the County is to deal with "dangerous dogs." We also connect his program with a self-imposed philosophy of a "no kill shelter" operation based on a grant which provides funds to community non-profits. Again, I would comment that a rational process would be to identify which services are best accomplished regionally.

8. All facets of government should plan and build together to ensure resources are being coordinated and optimized.

Implementation Action

This recommendation is absolutely true, particularly so as it relates to our technology implementation, space needs and ongoing efforts to reduce jail populations.

Commentary

This is done far more often than we are given credit. Examples such as the New Criminal Courthouse, our Geographic Information System, emergency management activities and handling the recent Presidential elections come to mind. However, Constitutional Officers and the court system each have been given in statute or legal precedent specific autonomy and responsibilities that assure checks and balances are in place in county government. Further efforts to have common budgetary reporting systems, common computer systems and software, common facility space requirements criteria and shared lobbying and legal services could reduce the burden on taxpayers. These would be accomplished legally through inter-local agreements and higher levels of voluntary cooperation.

The FY 06 and FY 07 budget contains multiple initiatives I have recommended to encourage cooperative ventures on issues such as our jail-overcrowding and integrated law enforcement systems.

This effort is even more difficult intergovernmentally. I believe the "responsible exercise of 'home rule' requires acceptance of responsibility to cooperate for the wellbeing of the region." Home rule and local autonomy of governments are

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fundamental principles of American democracy, and there are a variety of governments with different purposes, perspectives and abilities. This is particularly evident in discussions among the County and our nine municipalities. The Alachua County Commission and County Staff need to be mindful of the need to cooperate with other agencies. The County has been a major facilitator and convener of meetings including the visioning process, homelessness summit, the E-Civis grants program and efforts such as the transportation and recreation coordinating committees. The staff time and support of these efforts is also another source of expenditures for the County and there are several examples of the County carrying the majority of the costs of such efforts.

9. The County Commission should place on the general election ballot the initiative that the Constitutional Officers shall be elected as charter officers with the same functions and duties as in the constitution, law and statutes and without the right to appeal.

Implementation Action

This recommendation is a policy issue that should be discussed in a candid manner between the Board of County Commissioners and the Constitutional Officers or undertaken by a Charter Revision Commission sometime in the future.

Commentary

This is likely to be a very divisive issue. It would require a change in the County Charter and approval by the voters. I would schedule first a meeting to discuss the issue, then if determined appropriate by the Commission, address it through Charter Amendment.

Constitutional Offices make up about 45% of the General Fund budget and having fiscal authority over the constitutional officers would improve the Commission's ability to control its budget. However, it should be noted that there is no guarantee that the taxpayers would see any savings from the reorganization recommended by the committee. The County Commission having greater authority and responsibility would not lessen the need for the services the Constitutional Officers provide and the challenges they face such as jail overcrowding and changing election laws. I would speculate that such a referendum would create an acrimonious atmosphere that could hurt the credibility of the County due to the negative campaigning that would likely result.

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10. The County Commission should calculate the cost of the enhanced level of service the Sheriff's Office provides to municipalities and secures the recovery of those costs.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit and contracts have been directed to be entered into by the Commission.

Commentary

This recommendation requires the cooperation of the Sheriff's Office and his willingness to provide services to municipalities and charge them for the appropriate level of service. As recently as the July 7, 2005 budget presentation, the Chief of Staff for the Sheriff's Office has reiterated that they will provide universal countywide services. County staff has requested the Sheriff provide an estimate of what his basic level of countywide service costs compared to an enhanced level required by the municipalities. Municipalities would have to pay an increased cost for any enhanced service provided. The Sheriff has agreed to work with County Staff and the Mayors of municipalities to address this issue, but remains adamant he must provide services to any citizen in any jurisdiction requesting his assistance as a Constitutional Officer.

11. The Alachua County Commission should reduce the current general fund operating budget and direct those savings to specific and critical areas of source for the backlog of capital improvements.

Implementation Action

This has merit, but would be better and more easily achieved through redirecting growth in revenues to infrastructure rather than reducing in current funding. Redirection of new funding is completely controlled by the County Commission and not dependant on the cooperation of other entities or threatened reductions to clients of county services.

Commentary

This recommendation is being implemented out of a necessity due to the failure of the Better Parks Better Roads sales tax initiative. In the case of the General Fund, the proposed transfer of \$2 million in FY 06 to replace gasoline taxes used in the bonding for road reconstruction and paving accomplishes this goal. The County Commission's decision in the MSTU to no longer fund recreation programs through the YMCA and allocate those funds over a four-year phase-out to fund new park improvements is also an example.

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However each time we utilize the General Fund to address the backlog of needed infrastructure improvements we lose the opportunity to deal with other strategic goals and objectives of the Commission. The committee did not acknowledge in their report that the County is not dramatically increasing operational costs. For the past five years, the county departments have been held to a base level of operating budget in spite of fuel and utility cost increases; all enhancements have been approved by the County Commission. Personnel costs have increased over the years, but Alachua County’s wages remain below market as compared to our peers and the growth in employees has kept pace with population growth.

BOCC Employees per 1,000 Population

	FY 02 Adopted	FY 03 Adopted	FY 04 Adopted	FY 05 Adopted	FY 06 Tentative
Number of BOCC Employees	776	788	795	838	875.65
County Population	216,249	222,935	228,607	231,296	236,174
Number of Employees per 1,000 population	3.59	3.54	3.49	3.62	3.71

The use of General Fund revenues to fund capital infrastructure reflects the lack of diversity in existing revenues available and an increasing dependence on the growth in ad valorem taxes to fund operating costs. Reducing the current General Fund operating budget to pay for capital needs is not addressing the magnitude of the backlog which has developed over many years. In fact, this strategy is not new and is one of the reasons we have never generated the revenue necessary to build and repair our facilities. This is the reason the gap in available funding and documented needs for infrastructure maintenance is widening.

Finally, the FY 06 Tentative Budget dedicates 26% of the growth in ad valorem revenues towards new investments in capital infrastructure. In addition, over 5.18% of General Fund revenues this year will be expended on our Capital Improvements Program.

12. Advocate that the County Commission promote and seek changes to the law eliminating some sales tax exemptions.

Implementation Action

This has merit and has in fact been County policy to support this change for nearly a decade.

Commentary

Eliminating exemptions would increase funding to local governments if existing formulas remained intact. This reflects the legislative program of the Florida

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League of Cities and the Florida Association of Counties for years. As members of these organizations we support and employ lobbyists in Tallahassee annually to fight for this issue. It should be continued to be included in our legislative program.

13. The County Commission should take specific and immediate steps to enhance the public awareness of the sources and uses of public dollars. This might include signage with examples of both capital and operating costs of facilities such as parks and roads.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit and our Communication Coordinator will further implement this effort in the upcoming year.

Commentary

We will continue our efforts to provide information to the public on budgetary issues, as in past years, such as our ACCESS program and budget-in-brief documents. Future efforts, due to our enhanced Web site, will make it easier for interested citizens to access information on our budgeted programs. It is a fact that many citizens have little knowledge of what it actually costs to operate a government or the variety of services the County provides. The public also does not recognize the mandates placed upon the County through actions of the State and Federal governments. Signage in parks and a proposed annual report calendar are to be discussed in the FY 06 budget.

14. The BRC recommends the County Commission explore the issue of savings associated with alternative elections including the instant run off.

Implementation Action

This recommendation has merit and I would suggest a joint meeting of the Commission, the Supervisor of Elections and perhaps the original Campaign Finance Reform Committee.

Commentary

This recommendation is best addressed through a review by the Supervisor of Elections and may require legislative or charter changes to implement. An effort to educate the voters, the retraining of poll workers and impacts on voting should all be carefully considered before any change in elections law or procedure is enacted.

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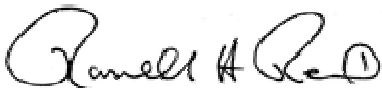
Conclusion

It is important to recognize the hard work of the Blue Ribbon Committee and the massive number of hours spent by these citizens to help prepare these recommendations and review the fiscal conditions of Alachua County. The issues involving County finances are complex and require an understanding of the structure of county government. The Committee members now have a far better understanding of the County's finances than the majority of our citizens and are to be commended for this effort.

This Committee's report, like those that preceded it, offers many of the same insights and will face the same challenges. Transforming Alachua County's financial structure and outlook will require a multi-year effort and the continued commitment of the County Commission and County Staff. The principle challenge I see is to have the commitment to implement, not just short-term reductions, but long-term solutions to the structural problems associated with our tax base. The appropriate forms of economic development and diversification of tax revenue sources would greatly improve the future of Alachua County.

Finally, there is one perspective that should not be lost sight of and that is the view from the citizen's perspective as a taxpayer and consumer, which is the desire for the delivery of high quality services at as little cost as possible. Unless prompted, citizens conduct their lives with little regard for their government or who provides their services, if they are satisfied with their services.

Respectfully Submitted,



Randall H. Reid
County Manager