

By
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A Message From Your Executive Director

It's A Start

In the last issue of *Roll Call*, I wrote an article entitled "Florida at the Crossroads." The article was aimed squarely at the frustration that I and probably most of our members feel about the current inadequacy of our state government to (1) sufficiently fund basic services and (2) the inequities of our current form of state taxation. These two factors, coupled with our unprecedented national recession, point to a need for new thinking about what we expect out of state government and how to do so with the greatest fairness to taxpayers.

The basic problem, as I see it, is that Florida's government is still pretty much mired in the thinking from the last century. We got away with it for a long time, selling Florida's sunshine and good temperatures, using growth of tourism and the building industry to fund state government. Now, sunshine doesn't sell so well with our clogged roads, escalating crime rates, subpar schools and universities, high insurance and property taxes. The last time I checked, Florida had more people moving out than moving in. Schools are actually losing students as working families vote with their feet, moving to such exotic locales as Georgia, Alabama, and even Mississippi and Louisiana. I never thought I would see the day when these states would be seen as more progressive and desirable than our beloved Florida. Further, with this de-population/lack of attraction, the growth that has fueled our economy and tax structure has gone out the window.

With this mass exodus (or avoidance of Florida in the first place), the thinking from the last century has turned this state upside down. As I have often harped to our elected leadership, we must collectively decide if we want Florida to be just a place for the rich and famous to play, living in their gated communities with private security and sending their kids to expensive private schools, or do we want a place where the average family can live a good life—happily hereafter. If the choice is the former, just change

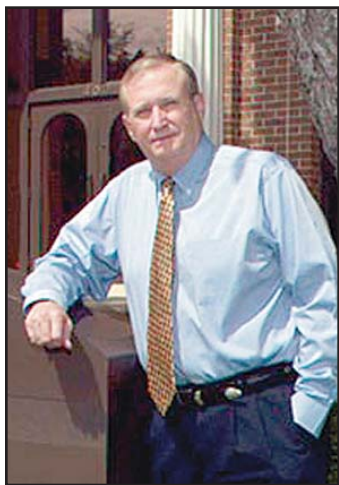
nothing and this is what we get. But, if the choice is the latter, then much work needs to be done on how we fund state government and the thinking behind such a change.

Now the good news. At least a start has been made by the powers-that-be to shift to a new way of looking at our situation. No doubt, the national recession which has left Florida's state government billions of dollars in the hole has been a useful impetus to rethink the whole situation. The billions of stimulus dollars coming from the federal government, plus some changes on the state revenue scene, have allowed the state government to patch together a bare bones budget for this coming year. I commend the Legislature for doing such things as passing a tobacco tax, levying new fees, okaying the Seminole gambling compact and closing a giant loophole where wealthy corporations were skating out of paying documentary taxes which you and I have to pay if we sell our homes (worth somewhere around \$500 million in tax revenue). The Legislature, especially the Senate, also took a hard look at some of the weird and unjust sales tax exemptions available to the rich and famous. Buy a yacht, no taxes. Buy a jon boat, there are taxes. Buy bottled water, no taxes. Buy a Coke, there are taxes. (Note: the bottled water exemption itself costs the state \$50 million dollars in lost revenue.) The list goes on and on.

Now the task of our state government is to do more than just study and look. How about putting these sweet heart deals on the chopping block, thus providing Florida with an adequate source of revenue? Believe it or not, companies and individuals seeking to move here, or stay here, actually want safe neighborhoods, decent schools and universities, and a good transportation system. These are magnets for a prosperous Florida. What the Governor and Legislature did this year is a good start; now it's time to finish the deal. Fix Florida's tax system, fix the national economy, and we are there. Problem solved. Florida will again be a place where we can work, play and prosper. ●

A city girl complains to her country boyfriend that he doesn't include her in his hobbies. So he says next weekend he'll take her ice fishing with him.

She replies, "Oh great! What am I supposed to do, just sit in the boat?"



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Ron DeLord is the former Executive Director of the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas (CLEAT) and has written extensively about the police labor movement and police profession.

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Guest Commentary

Time To Circle The Wagons

Recession puts cops' pay and benefits at risk

The world of law enforcement is changing, not just in the U.S. but globally. The cost of wages, health insurance, pensions, training and equipment are skyrocketing at the same time as the economy worldwide is entering a recession.

Elected officials are being forced to trim their budgets, and the biggest budgets in any state and local government are police and fire.

In many states the non-essential public services have been trimmed back as the economy slowed down. Now many governments have decided to see how much they can trim from essential services. In the poorer communities, there is not much fat left to trim.

So who should be worried? The highly compensated law enforcement agencies, especially in areas of the country where the housing markets have collapsed, are the most vulnerable. These agencies have received wages and benefits that far exceed those enjoyed by the general public, including many of the elected officials.

Some police unions have started to believe that they are bullet-proof from budget cuts. Just ask yourself what happened to the mighty auto workers, steel workers and coal miners. They were at the top of their game and collapsed. If your union believes nothing bad will happen, you are in for a rude awakening.

It will start with a trickle such as civilianizing or contracting out more positions and using technology.

The elected officials will tell the public, "Why should we pay a police officer \$100,000 a year to do a job a non-sworn employee or private contractor will do for half the cost."

It is getting harder and harder to justify using sworn officers in many jobs that were traditionally police functions. The next move will include red light and eventually speed cameras to "free up" these highly paid officers for more serious police work. Do not expect the revenue to go back to the police department.

Next the pressure will mount to create two-tier wage and benefit plans. Despite knowing the internal dissension that will be caused by having two officers working side-by-side, and each having different health insurance or pension plans, police unions are starting to accept or be forced to accept two-tier plans.

The common employer pitch to the union is, "We can continue to fund your pension, but we must have budget relief by allowing the city to pay less for future officers. If you refuse, we will be forced to lower the pension for current officers." The pressure to sell the unborn to save themselves is more than many union leaders can stand.

And if all else fails to squeeze concessions out of the police budgets, the city will declare bankruptcy to abrogate its employee contracts like Vallejo, California did recently. While the city is far from bankrupt, the goal is to use taxpayer money to tie the unions up in court and drain their treasuries.

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