

Finances tough, cuts are tougher, commissioner says

By Don Walker
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WATCHDOG

Commission Chairman Robin Fisher to talk about that recent budget controversy, projections on the county's finances for next year and his thoughts on the political atmosphere in Brevard County.

What constitutes a tax increase has been a big topic of conversation in Brevard County this year.

At the root of the matter was a proposed county budget that called for higher property tax rates. Because of lower values, most property owners had lower tax bills despite the higher rates. Still, the higher rates left many taxpayers incensed.



Fisher

FLORIDA TODAY reporter Don Walker sat down with

Q: What is the current outlook for the county's finances next year, and is there anything that can be done now to avoid another showdown between commissioners and county residents?

Fisher: All I hear is that mindset that we're not living within our budget, and we're not making reductions. But that's all we've been doing since I've been in office is making reduc-

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tions.

As a commissioner, I've never had the luxury of the 'Good Times,' so I'm not sure what that's like. All I've been dealing with since taking office is less revenue every year and it's been very difficult, and we've made some tough cuts. We're likely going to be down another \$80-something-million next year. It's all depending on what the property appraiser comes back with and what kind of property values we have, but if the trend continues like it's going we'll have \$80 million less to work with.

There's probably four to five workshops that go on prior to when you start setting the millage rate, and talking about whether to roll back or not roll back. Can we get better at that process and get better input? Yes. There seems to be a group of citizens who want to be involved in that process more, and I think we ought to give them that chance.

Q: Let's talk about the political climate. Commissioner Andy Anderson made a comment recently there's a lot of anger out there. You were the target of some of that anger during the budget sessions. How do you see it?

Fisher: I think people are mad at a national level, but their access to national politicians isn't as easy as it is to us. And so, they're so mad at what's happening in Washington — that they're not making enough cuts fast enough or not approving things quick enough — and it rolls on down to the state level. Then, you have limited access to state legislators. But local? We're part of the community, we're there every day, we're in your face, we're making decisions and we're visible. And so I think we get a lot of that frustration. We've been forced to make those cuts. Washington can do a continuation of the budget and they keep moving, but every Oct. 1, we have to determine what that budget is, we have to make those cuts, and we have to do it real time.

Q: What's your biggest concern for the county financially?

Fisher: The question I have for citizens is, 'How safe is safe?' I say this in a way that I'm a big supporter of law enforcement, a big supporter of public safety. But when you really look at where the increase has been over the last several years and you take the normal general fund stuff that you fund — those employment levels are back to 2001-2002. But law enforcement and public safety, that continues to climb. At some point the community will have to realize we're safe enough, and if you feel that way are you going to keep funding law enforcement and public safety at the levels we fund them today? Look, we're the 10th largest county in population, but we're 57th lowest in property taxes. That's pretty impressive. I think we've made some cuts. Is it expensive to be here? Yeah. Is it more expensive to be in Volusia County, Miami and Orange County? Yeah.

Q: Any plans to run for a state legislative seat or other political office?

A: I get asked that question all the time, but it's funny I'm probably the only one who hasn't announced that I'm running again for county commission or something else. I'm still soul-searching. At the next level, I think you're told how to vote at the federal or state level. I'm not very good at being told I have to do something. I'm going to do what I think is right and I don't want a party affiliation telling me how I'm going to vote. I'm somewhat comfortable and very happy in the role I'm playing as county commissioner. I've got a year and half left in the job. I'd rather govern than campaign right now. The first thing I have to do is a good job for citizens of District 1.