

OPINIONS

Our Views

Another tough slog

Commission's new leaders should stress teamwork in tackling Brevard ills

If you think Brevard County's budget crisis has been bad the past few years, hang on tight.

The worst may be yet to come.

The Space Coast continues suffering from a weak economy characterized by high unemployment and a depressed housing market plagued with foreclosures.

Add next year's retirement of the space shuttle fleet and thousands more workers without a job, with some maybe losing their homes, and this is what you've got.

Property tax revenue projected to drop 17 percent in 2011-12, 10 percent in 2012-13 and 7 percent in 2013-14, according to the Brevard County Property Appraiser's Office.

That comes on top of a nearly 13 percent reduction for 2010-11.

The decreases essentially guarantee more cuts to essential services, more layoffs among county workers and a heightened struggle to maintain the Space Coast's quality of life.

Setting the tone

It's against this backdrop that county commissioners this week named two of their members — Robin Fisher and Andy Anderson — to serve as chairman and vice chairman, respectively, for the next year.



Fisher



Anderson

The positions come with no additional power but are important because they give those who hold the posts the ability to set the tone for how to tackle the county's problems.

It also puts them in a position to take stronger leadership roles in trying to diversify Brevard's economy and attract new industries and businesses in the post-shuttle era.

To that end, Fisher — who holds the distinction of being the first African-American to chair the commission in Brevard's 156-year history — and Anderson should stress board teamwork in the tough slog ahead.

That won't be easy as the commission showed this year.

Despite strong differences, it cobbled together a budget with deep spending cuts that also held some taxes steady and slightly increased one to protect sheriff's deputies, police and fire first-responders and ocean lifeguards.

In all, commissioners have cut \$156 million from the budget through line-by-line spending reviews the past few years.

Some 550 jobs also have been eliminated, bringing the county workforce down to 2001 levels. A four-year wage freeze for workers also has been enacted.

But that's hardly the end of it.

The projected drops in property tax revenue from 2011 to 2014 mean this year's hold-the-fort effort could wither in the face of still less money to keep services operating.

Still more cuts

So where do they cut?

Eliminating more jobs seems probable, although ever-deeper reductions could soon reach the point where key services are crippled.

Privatizing some programs also may be possible, but commissioners recently rejected the idea of turning libraries over to a contractor after thousands of residents voiced objections.

And then there's the matter of more delays in improving Brevard's infrastructure.

The county currently has more than \$600 million in unmet road needs alone, with projects for repair and widening shelved and the list growing every year.

Stacked up on a desk, those issues would be daunting enough.

But commissioners also have to remain aggressive in working with state and local economic development groups to diversify Brevard's economy as the shuttle program leaves town.

Eyeing opportunity

Some of that can be accomplished through tax abatement and other programs, but also can require the board to ante up when a potentially lucrative opportunity arises.

A good example is the commission's August decision to pledge \$500,000 for each of the next five years to help finance the proposed Sematech project in Palm Bay, which would turn a former Intersil building into a national hub for solar energy research.

In doing so, the county joined a consortium of Central Florida governments, universities and economic development organizations attempting to gain a federal grant to lure the project.

If the project goes elsewhere, which we could learn within the next month or two, the county's money is not allocated.

As the board's new leaders, Fisher and Anderson have to help steer a course through all these obstacles.

That makes teamwork more important than ever.