

SUNDAY DECEMBER 26, 2010

SPACE COAST

1B

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Fisher pushing for roads and space

County commission chairman 1st black leader

As the new county commission chairman, Robin Fisher will have a bigger impact in 2011 on your taxes, roads and county services such as libraries and the sheriff's office.

That his peers unanimously elected the board's lone Democrat, says much about Fisher's leadership and fiscal outlook since taking office in 2008. Fisher, a Titusville insurance agent and investor, is the first black chairman in Brevard County's 156-year history.



**Matt
Reed**

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I questioned him about leadership, a surprise push to pave roads and his campaign to "Save Space" in an interview first broadcast on WBCC-TV and FloridaToday.com.

Question: What do you make of being the first black chairman?

Fisher: I don't think my ethnicity or my color has anything to do with why I'm a commissioner. People in north Brevard voted for me because they understand what I'm about and believe in. They know I care about people.

If you're African-American, that is something you can be proud of, to be the first in 156 years. But at the end of the day, they're judging me on the decisions I make, what I do and how I handle myself.

Q: How will you lead the commission in 2011?

Fisher: A huge goal is, I've got to get commissioners moving in a positive direction. We've had a very difficult time the past two years where, if you were outside looking in, you'd think the commission doesn't function well as a team.

If I could, I would pack us all into a car and we'd all go live together for about two weeks, and make sure we had a better understanding of each other. We've all got good qualities. But there's been some hard feelings among commissioners because of campaign stuff. I hope people can forgive each other and we can move this county in the right direction.

Q: What are Brevard County government's biggest looming challenges?

Fisher: Budget-wise, the real difficult thing is the normal cost of inflation, with
See FISHER, 6B

New chairman wants to pave 50 miles

FLORIDA TODAY

of road in central, north Brevard

FISHER, from 1B

health insurance, gas, those types of things. And I've seen early numbers that show we're going to be \$12 million down from the previous year.

If that trend continues, this commission's got to get honest with itself and realize that — just as you do in private business — you've got to find other ways to generate revenue. And we've got to do that outside of property taxes.

The challenge is that we are also committing ourselves to economic development... We've made commitments to Sematech, we've made some commitments to Embraer and other companies, and we're taking money out of reserves to fulfill those.

Doing that on a long-term basis is not sustainable. We've got to generate some dollars for economic development because jobs are very important.

Q: Yet, you just announced a goal of paving 50 miles of roads in central and northern Brevard in each of the next two years. How?

Fisher: Our gas-tax

money had always been spent on (new) capital projects and collector-type roads. We finally decided we could use that money for maintenance.

That was a really big move by commissioners, coming together. It wasn't a 5-0 vote, but it was a 4-1 vote. It did a lot for me and my relationship with Commissioner Andy Anderson (of Palm Bay). It was pretty well known that I was opposed to the St. John's Heritage Parkway deal and that we were going to build a whole new road while ignoring these roads that had maintenance issues in Commissioner Nelson's district (Merritt Island, Cocoa Beach, Cocoa) and my district.

We're doing something very bold. I call it the "50-50 Plan." We're going to pave 50 miles of roads in 2011. I've told staff: No excuses, we're going to get it done. And then we're going to pave 50 miles of roads in 2012. In two years, we'll have about \$10 million in improvements.

You know what's important about that? People pay their taxes for years and years, and they come home and they're hitting potholes

on their street and saying, "Where are my tax dollars going?" I think, finally, we can show them that we found a way, in one of the most difficult economic times, to pave the roads in front of their house.

Q: You headed the "Save Space" campaign with a website, public letter-writing effort and a rally that drew 4,000 to the Cocoa Expo in April. What do you make of the results, if any?

Fisher: What Save Space did was, it helped change the administration's original direction for Kennedy Space Center and the space program. More money got pumped into it.

We're proud of it because for the first time in this county, we were able to bring together the Brevard legislators and the community to fight for a common cause. We had news media from all over the country to interview and talk about it.

We heightened the attention in Tallahassee. Space Florida got more money. We had 20,000 Facebook fans — that's a lot of fans.

Now, with the commercial space industry, we have to make sure we own that market.

Q: Was that you in photos onstage with President Barack Obama when he made his appearance at KSC?

Fisher: Yeah. And Save Space helped me get in there and have a conversation with him.

I was lucky enough to be one of the seven people in a room with him. And I gave him my plan. He didn't take it then. But he said something very interesting.

I had told him, "President Obama, I'll tell you what I'd like you to do. I know you're

gearing up for 2012. And you have to make sure you win Florida. And if you're going to win Florida, I think you need to pump the \$6 billion into Kennedy Space Center, and you need to extend the shuttle for the next couple years. And if you do that, Florida would probably lead the nation in economic recovery."

He told me, "That's a pretty good plan, except that it costs about \$2 billion a year to do that. And most of the time, people tell me this

administration spends too much money on too many things. So, where do I get the \$2 billion?"

I didn't have a good comeback, other than to say the space program is very important here. And . . . he's right. If you're not going to have additional taxes, and you're going to get something here, you have to pay for it somewhere else. ■

Contact Reed at 321-242-3631 or mreed@floridatoday.com.