

# Protect the Quality of Life in Brevard

By Vince Lamb, concerned citizen, with help from friends

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Brevard County Commissioners held a budget workshop on Wednesday July 22 to review the proposed budget for the fiscal year that begins on October 1, 2010. The workshop began at 6:00 p.m. and continued until 3:00 a.m. on Thursday morning. Howard Tipton, County Manager, presented a proposed budget based upon leaving the millage rates for property taxes unchanged from the prior year while real estate values have declined 12.5%. Department Managers discussed the changes required by the proposed budget on their departments. Some of the severe impacts are summarized below:

- The Public Works Director indicated that road maintenance is underfunded so badly that vehicle crashes and other public safety issues are likely to result.
- Community centers will be open to the public only three days each week.
- The Fire Department will provide ocean lifeguards only seasonally and drastically reduce the number of beaches protected by lifeguards.
- S.C.A.T., the county transportation service, will eliminate routes that thousands of residents, including many disabled and elderly, use to attend work and medical appointments.
- The Brevard Historical Commission will lose its only remaining employee and close its office.
- Animal Control will reduce staffing so extensively that their mission must change from public safety to emergency response.
- The Environmentally Endangered Lands Program will eliminate most educational programs for schoolchildren and reduce the hours at the Enchanted Forest and Barrier Island Center.

More than 700 concerned citizens attended the Budget Workshop. The first 300 people packed the Commission Chambers while others filled upstairs meeting rooms to watch the proceedings on televisions. Five persons spoke in favor of reducing the size of government. Nearly one hundred spoke of the importance to them of a department or service that the proposed budget cuts will negatively affect. Many speakers indicated their willingness to pay additional property taxes to preserve our quality of life.

The Commissioners voted unanimously to increase the millage needed to prevent layoffs of 31 current deputies within the Sheriff's Department. However, they voted 3-2 against increasing the millage to fund the Public Works Department (Road, Bridge and Stormwater Drainage) at the 2009/10 level. Throughout the workshop, Commissioners Nelson and Fisher indicated their willingness to reduce the budget impacts by adjusting the millage rate to offset the shortfalls produced by property value decreases. Commissioners Bolin, Infantini and Anderson did not indicate their commitments to reduce funding cuts except for the Sheriff's Department.

## **Brevard County Property Tax Basics**

Millage rate is the amount per thousand dollars used to calculate property taxes. A millage rate of 15 will result in taxes of \$15 for every thousand dollars in the assessed value. The County Commissioners set the millage rate for the General Fund and some other items on our tax bills. The School Board sets the school taxes. Municipalities set the millage rates for city taxes.

When the total assessed value of taxable properties decreases, the County Commission is allowed to increase the tax millage rate in order to maintain the same level of revenue as the preceding year. The Tax Assessor's Office has indicated that a decrease of 12.5% in real estate values for taxable properties has occurred. The Commissioners could increase the millage rate by 0.8825 mills to allow tax revenues to equal the prior year. Florida Law defines this adjustment as a rollback - not a tax increase.

## **Protecting the Quality of Life in Brevard**

Homestead Exemption and the Save Our Homes (SOH) cap complicate Florida property taxes. The property tax on residences eligible for Homestead Exemption is limited to annual increases of 3% (or the increase in the Consumer Price Index, whichever is less). However, people who have owned residences with Homestead Exemption for long periods may experience small tax increases even when property values are falling.

If the millage rate adjusted to provide the same property tax revenues as the previous year, most property owners will pay the same amount in taxes as the prior year. A relatively few homeowners will experience small increases - even if the millage rate is unchanged.

## **Looking into the Future**

Some of these proposed reductions represent the underfunding of critical services, such as allowing our road maintenance to diminish public safety. Others simply reduce quality of life aspects of our county. The Economic Development Council is encouraging businesses to relocate to Brevard County or to open offices here. If our roads are bad and our parks are closed, who would want to relocate here? Similarly, the Tourism Development Council wants to increase the \$2.9 Billion spent by visitors to Brevard County. If people drown because no lifeguards are available, will visitors keep coming to our beaches?

Property tax revenues are difficult to increase in future years. Considering the Save Our Homes provision, a 12.5% decrease in tax revenues in the next fiscal year would require several years to recover because the taxes on residences with Homestead Exemption can only increase by 3% annually.

## **What Can You Do?**

Brevard County Commissioners seem concerned that adjusting the millage rate to keep property taxes at the prior year level will be unpopular with our residents - even though their property tax bills will remain the same in most cases. While seven hundred residents showed up for the Budget Workshop to state their concerns about proposed budget reductions and staff cuts, three Commissioners were silent regarding their willingness to adjust the millage rate to the rollback level.

If we do nothing and the Commission votes to retain the 2009/10 millage rate, staff reductions will begin in September and the service reductions will be noticeable by October 1, 2010. Deteriorating roads, unsolved storm water drainage problems, poorly maintained parks, inadequate assistance for veterans and other changes will be hard to ignore.

If you want to preserve the public safety and quality of life that we have enjoyed in Brevard County, contact all five County Commissioners to encourage them to keep property tax revenues at the prior year level. Let them know that you are willing to forego the property tax reductions in order to preserve important services. Contact the commissioners by phone, email or the Postal Service as soon as possible - definitely before their meeting on August 3, 2010.

## Protecting the Quality of Life in Brevard

District 1: **Commissioner Robin Fisher**

*VICE CHAIRMAN*

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District 2: **Commissioner Chuck Nelson**

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District 3: **Commissioner Trudie Infantini**

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District 4: **Commissioner Mary Bolin**

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District 5: **Commissioner Andy Anderson**

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Brevard County Ocean Lifeguard  
Endangered Species?

### Sample Message to Commissioner:

Dear Commissioner Bolin:

I strongly oppose the proposed budget cuts to Public Works, the Ocean Lifeguards program, Parks and Recreation, the Historical Commission and the Environmentally Endangered Lands Program. I encourage you to utilize the rollback provision to keep Brevard County property taxes at the same level as the previous year. I do not favor a tax increase, but I am willing to pay the same property taxes that I paid last year.

Please preserve the public safety and quality of life offered by Brevard County today. If reducing property taxes requires not maintaining our roads, closing community centers and other reduced services, please leave my property taxes unchanged.

Respectfully,

Vince Lamb  
Merritt Island, Florida

### Watch the Video of the Budget Workshop on your Computer

Click on this link <http://brevardcountyfl.iqm2.com/Citizens/Default.aspx> or enter this address in your Browser.

Click on the July 22nd Budget Workshop line under Recent Media.

Note the Agenda panel on the lower left. Click on an agenda item to start the video with that item.

If you press the "F" key, the video should be shown in full screen mode. Press the "Esc" key to close the full-screen mode.

When you move the mouse cursor to the bottom of the screen, a progress bar will appear. You can drag the control point in the progress bar to navigate within the video.