

Florida should keep its hands off local governments' budgets

BY RON LITTLEPAGE | STORY UPDATED AT 5:55 AM ON TUESDAY, MAR. 2, 2010



This is the time of year that I usually begin a column with a joke that goes like this:

Run for the hills, people. Today, the danger begins. The Florida Legislature is now in session.

But these aren't humorous times.

Once again, Florida is facing a big budget shortfall, estimated by some at \$3 billion.

Coming on top of other billion-dollar budget holes in the past two years brought on by the recession, there's not much left to cut.

And, with 2010 being an election year and a slew of legislators either seeking reelection or running for higher office, any increase in fees or taxes is off the table.

Gov. Charlie Crist, ever optimistic, thinks things aren't so bad.

To balance the budget, he's betting on an improving state economy to increase revenues, an agreement with the Seminole Indians on gambling that would provide millions of dollars and help from the federal government to pay for soaring Medicaid costs.

He even wants to increase spending in some areas, such as \$100 million more for the state university system to produce more graduates in fields like math and science, key ingredients to creating more jobs and moving the state away from an economy based on growth, tourism and agriculture.

Key legislators, however, are saying Crist is wrong, the budget he is proposing is out of whack and everything is vulnerable to cuts, including higher education spending.

That's an approach that will ensure that Florida remains on a downhill slide to mediocrity.

Speaking of budget cuts and the slide to mediocrity, a bill has been introduced in the Senate that would destroy the concept of home rule for local governments.

This time around the Taxpayer Bill of Rights, known as TABOR, is being championed by Senate President-designate Mike Haridopolos.

The proposed constitutional amendment, if passed, would limit the amount local government revenues could grow on an annual basis to the rate of inflation plus a factor for growth.

Even worse, the amendment would require that any increase of fees or taxes would have to be approved by two-thirds of the voters.

That's right, two-thirds.

And there's a possibility the amendment would even apply to rate increases by JEA.

Meddling in local affairs by the Legislature and Crist have already hurt the ability of Jacksonville's city government to pay for critical services and to assure a high quality of life.

There's a good chance that Haridopolos' warped idea won't fly during this session, but watch out for when he becomes Senate president.

I do find it ironic that slash-taxes politicians like Haridopolos argue against the proposed Hometown Democracy constitutional amendment by reminding everyone that our form of government is a representative democracy in which elected officials make decisions on such things as land use instead of those issues being put on the ballot.

But then Haridopolos would have government revenue issues decided by direct democracy instead of by local officials elected to represent their constituents.

Can you say two-faced?

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