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Mayor: Unfunded mandates increase power of the state

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With the city done with its goal-setting sessions and getting down to work on the budget, we sat down with Mayor Susan Whelchel to talk about programs the state and feds require the city to do, without reimbursing any money to pay for them.

Whelchel wants city taxpayers to know the city has no say in these unfunded mandates, and the money could be used for something else that residents want or need, or not spend it.

For instance, it costs the city \$200,000 to submit, review and approve plans for land use and other matters for the Comprehensive Planning Process. Mandated staffing at water and wastewater treatment plants cost \$160,000, although the city says monitoring can be handled remotely.

Proposed federal and state mandates would require the city to remove certain nutrients in their unclaimed water supply that would cost \$16 million. The law would require the water to be treated to drinking quality when it's only used for irrigation, mostly for golf courses.

Q: Why are unfunded mandates such a big issue for city taxpayers?

A: If you add up every penny it is in the millions. What unfunded mandates are doing

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is increasing the power of the state and decreasing the power of local government and residents to decide how they are going to spend their budget. We have no voice in them.

Q: Is this a case of the state or feds holding the city to a higher standard?

A: There are things we're already ahead of, and would do even if the state didn't tell us to do. For instance, the state mandates that we give police officers educational incentives and more pay. It costs us \$318,000 and we would have done that anyway. Maybe better.

Q: How many unfunded mandates can the city absorb without raising taxes?

A: Mandates for some programs may be a good idea, but they're cost prohibitive and could theoretically cause us to go broke. The feds are now suggesting regulations to collect and treat all stormwater. It would cost us millions and we can't collect runoff every time it rains.

Q: What you can do about this?

A: I was there when The Florida League of Mayors launched the Stop Passing the Buck campaign. Some 17 or 18 of the [Palm Beach County](#) mayors have agreed to support the major lobbying efforts. There's a watch list for [Palm Beach County](#). I want to be on top of any bill being proposed so we can protest. I plan to blog about this on my website and bring it up in council meetings and workshops.

Q: When will this come up in the budget?

A: We form the budget in mid-July and by the end of September we have three budget hearings. We're fighting for every dollar. The state is facing a shortfall, so it's looking for other sources of money. We want our state legislators to terminate any mandate to municipalities that doesn't have a dedicated funding source.

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