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## Strapped cities, counties reach to raise cash

Daphne Sashin

Sentinel Staff Writer

September 14, 2009

Just like consumers, local governments are struggling to pay the bills with less money in the bank.

Plummeting property values took the biggest bite out of municipal budgets, but fewer fees related to building construction and other effects of the economic slowdown have hurt coffers too. Cities and counties also lost money from the additional \$25,000 homestead exemptions that took effect last year.

Compared to you and me, though, cities and counties have a lot more ways to fill the gaps. And they're trying just about every way possible this year.

Property-tax hikes, new fees for street lights or garbage pickup, staff layoffs and buyouts, shuttered fire stations, shorter library hours -- all are being considered as governments finish their budgets in the next three weeks. Those that had some padding are dipping into reserves.

"People aren't buying furniture, and that affects sales tax. People stop building homes or businesses, and they stop taking out building permits, and that's a revenue source for cities and counties. People aren't driving as much, so that affects gas taxes," Seminole County Property Appraiser David Johnson said.

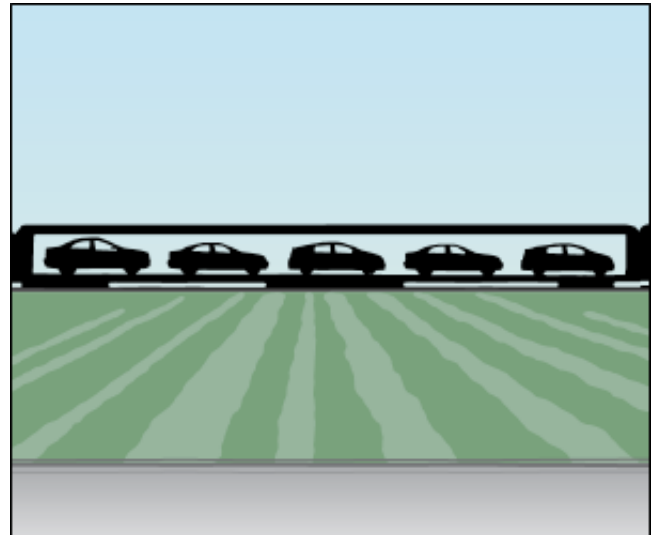
But in some cases, taxpayers have already pushed back.

Seminole officials dropped a proposed stormwater fee after a deluge of criticism, and Osceola agreed not to close a fire station -- for now. But that just means they'll have to find the money to pay for them somewhere else or postpone or cut projects, said Kraig Conn, legislative counsel for the Florida League of Cities.

"There's no more hidden pots of money," Conn said. "Cities and counties are having to make hard choices. Citizens have an expectation of a minimum level of services to continue to enjoy the quality of life that they want □.□. We can increase the [property-tax rate] or we can look to another revenue source, or we can decrease the level of service. Those are your three choices."

Those include:

- In Casselberry, some homeowners were angered Monday night by the city's decision to charge them



\$37.60 per year to maintain the same streetlights they've had for years -- and some businesses will pay much more. That's because the city's share of gas taxes, which paid for traffic signals, debt on road improvements and a \$300,000 streetlight budget, have plummeted -- from \$1.7 million in 2003 to less than \$100,000 expected this year.

- Belle Isle is adding about \$200 per household for garbage pickup.
- Osceola increased fire fees for homeowners, vacant land and hotels, but left alone nonprofits, agricultural land and commercial and industrial properties.
- Apopka gave its staff until Monday, Sept. 14, to volunteer for buyouts, and 22 of 400 employees offered to be considered. The city offered a week of pay for every year of service and a year's worth of health insurance with hopes of replacing some higher-paid employees who are approaching retirement age with entry-level staff. City Council members agreed in a workshop earlier this month not to raise the tax rate.

"We're hearing from our public pretty clearly they want us to lower taxes," Chief Administrative Officer Richard Anderson said. "We don't want to dip into reserves, and the only other savings we can look at are in employee areas."

Taxpayers may be wondering what cities and counties did with the money they collected during the good years. In Seminole, "it was spent on services that citizens demanded," county spokeswoman Susan Vernon-Devlin said.

"We bought land to preserve Seminole County, there are more firefighters, there are more sheriffs' deputies." As the county's population grew, services were expanded, she said. "A lot of those services are reduced now, and going forward, people will probably see some other reductions when the reserves are no longer available."

Governments that spent boom-time money on one-time projects are faring better now than those that added "recurring expenses like new facilities or wage increases or pension increases or health-care increases," Orange County Property Appraiser Bill Donegan said.

"Maybe they couldn't help it, but that's recurring money," Donegan said. With the extra real-estate taxes gone, "you've got to find that money elsewhere."

*Rich McKay and Víctor Manuel Ramos of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. Daphne Sashin can be reached at 407-650-6361 or dsashin@orlandosentinel.com.*

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