'What have you done for me lately?'

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“What have you done for me lately?”
The taxpayer wants to know, “My checkbook is suffering greatly, As town expenses grow.”
The answer, dear voter, is easy. Your tax rate declined in the past; The time has now come To get caught up some, So please don’t complain quite so fast.

What on earth is all the fuss about? As happens every year about this time, Longboat Key’s commissioners, together with key administrators, are struggling with next year’s annual budget, juggling income and expenditures so as to arrive at a fair and equitable tax rate.

To an observer of the local scene, it would appear that masses of inflamed citizens are ready to march on Town Hall in full hue and cry, with pitchforks and torches. Firefighters have walked picket lines. Leaders of PIC, the Public Interest Committee, have issued ukases demanding “takeaways” from current employee benefits.

Numerous letters to editors have weighed in on every side of the issue, from firing employees to slashing wages, to keeping things “just as they are.” Editors themselves, mouths frothing with rage, have demanded that expenditures be cut and that Gulf of Mexico tides recede.

Hey people, calm down. Let’s look at the facts. First, a disclaimer. This writer hates tax increases as much as anyone. But is what the commissioners are contemplating actually an increase in the tax rate?

From 1995 to 2001, the tax rate remained static at 2.322 mils. Thereafter, in each subsequent year, the tax rate was reduced, to 2.15 mils in 2002; 2.00 mils in 2003; 1.85 mils in 2004; 1.55 mils in 2005; 1.465 in 2006 and 1.4175 in 2007. The current proposal is to move the mil rate back up to 1.6053. But in case anyone hasn’t noticed: the gravy train has screeched to an abrupt halt.

Housing values are in free fall, new construction has ground to a halt, the dollar has shrunk in value and it is going to take more of them to provide the same service as before. These are matters that are beyond the control of the local administration. Our genius leaders in Washington have brought us to this status, and Tallahassee’s ministrations have complicated, rather than helped, resolve the local conundrum.

At its last work session, the commissioners were divided as to whether to set a mil rate of 1.6053 or plan to reduce it somewhat in September. We would strongly suggest that the Town Commission stay the course and stick with the higher figure. A reduction would constitute false economy and make crafting a budget for the following year an impossible morass.

The national economy is not going to recover anytime soon, regardless of which political party takes control next January. It is left to local authorities, therefore, to tighten belts as much as possible, while still providing a decent level of service.

It behooves the citizens of Longboat Key to decide the decibel level of carp and crying and let the commissioners and administration do their jobs.

The stormy economic seas will pass, and the ship of state will ultimately right itself. In the meantime, a little patience and fortitude should go a long way.

RICHARD L. HERSHATTER is a retired Connecticut lawyer and novelist who writes a weekly column of interest to Floridians. He can be reached at hershatter@lbknews.com.

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