

KeyOpinion

If You Send It; They Will Spend It

Richard L. Hershatter
Contributing Columnist

**When a politician wants to spend your money,
He doesn't need to ask or beg for it,
To him you represent a pot of honey
To drain away in taxes bit by bit.**

We've reached the time of year when politicians attempt the sleight of hand of raising taxes while lowering taxes.

This is not the Land of Oz, and the deed is not accomplished through the use of smoke and mirrors.

No, the time honored method of giving with one hand while taking away with the other is accomplished by taking advantage of a growing tax base caused by increased construction, to give the illusion that more is less.

For example, Manatee County recently unveiled a proposed budget for next year that would increase annual expenditures by \$70 million, or slightly over 13%.

Now granted, insurance rates are up because of last year's hurricanes, gasoline prices have spiraled upward and the Consumer Price Index will probably nudge 4%, but a 13% tax increase in one fiscal year?

And to add insult to injury, the proposed jump comes at a time when the County has raised its gasoline tax. As if this were not enough, the County Administrator also proposes increases in so-called "impact fees," as well as higher fees for the planning and building departments, utilities, garbage collection and golf fees.

But "not to worry" we are told, the actual tax rate can be lowered, thanks to the fact that the area's 22% growth is by itself "resulting in additional millions in new property tax receipts."

Where is all this money going? Well, the County

Manager would like to add 34 new employees to the present staff of 1,800 workers.

The proposed budget would also allocate an additional \$11 million to the County Sheriff and increase available jail beds by 200. Why the sheriff needs 200 extra beds is not quite clear, unless authorities are anticipating a surge of scandals involving improper dealings by public officials.

Although it is possible that crime is on the rise for Manatee, it is more likely that the vastly increased expenditures signal a garden-variety case of empire building.

By law, the county commissioners are required to adopt a final budget package on or before Sept. 30, so that the workshops and public hearings are scheduled during the summer season, when many taxpayers are away on vacation.

The timing is unfortunate, because whatever fiscal action is taken by the county impacts most heavily on the municipalities and partial municipalities contained within its borders.

Lowering the tax rate may very well be pleasing to the average taxpayer, but if overall spending increases unreasonably, the result is like a giant Ponzi scheme. The impact may be delayed, but as the housing market and the economy cool down, the consequences become magnified in ensuing years.

Unbridled spending may be tolerated on a national level, but the Federal government can print money. Last



we heard, Manatee County cannot.

There will be several public hearings and two or more workshops before a final budget is ultimately adopted. It behooves individual residents to pay close attention and make their feelings heard.

Although an increase in expenditures is inevitable, the size of the budget is not. Some of the reasons being advanced need to be closely examined.

We are told, for example, that the County misjudged the cost of the new Emergency Operations Center, which is now estimated to be \$50 million, instead of half that amount.

If so, someone needs to be held accountable for the miscalculation, but the cost represents a capital expenditure and should be spread out over a period of time, instead of being used to leverage a one-year budget.

In the final analysis, people get the kind of government (and the kind of budgets) that they vote for. If objections are not raised, politicians will surmise that either the voters are happy, or else not paying attention.

If the voters are heard, but disregarded, the remedy will be at the polls in subsequent elections.

**Commission actions must be watched
And checked with all the facts,
So spending plans do not get botched
With a high and costly tax.**

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Will Moorings Owners Relive History?

Al Green
Contributing Columnist

The recent reports chronicling the possibility of the sale of the Moorings, the marina inside the gates of the Bay Isles, to the Lesser Group, the owners of the Longboat Key Club golf operations and the Resort, raised memories of a long ago controversy.

Tee Time Tribulations

This long story started back in the late eighties. Every morning, members of the golf club would line up outside of the pro shop dutifully waiting to see if they would be able to schedule a tee time three days hence. In addition to the normal aggravation of getting up at the crack of dawn to be first in line, the problems were exacerbated by the knowledge that the owners of the club at the time, Arvida, were letting guests at their hotel and people who rented through their real estate agency to secure tee times in advance.

Minutes of Commission meetings at that time told of complaints of this nature at almost every meeting. The commissioners were getting heat and they felt they had to do something. Fortunately for the commissioners, Arvida, in addition to running the club and the hotel, was also deeply involved in development of the entire south end of the Key and needed the good will of the commissioners to secure approval for their projects. So a decision was made to have the two sides meet and try to arrive at a modus operandi that would eliminate the issue. After almost a year of discussion, they arrived at a compromise plan.

This plan called for a "Memo of Understanding" that would lay out in detail how the club was to be operated as far as it involved the interplay between members and the owners. It was an agreement between the parties as to the interpretation of the original documents that allowed for the construction of the golf course. It set out who was to be a member, who was to get tee times, how charitable events that closed the course were to be scheduled, etc. In other words, it set out a code of conduct that would forever more remove controversy and replace it with a specific written agreement. Everyone seemed to be happy with it.

A few months later, Arvida came to the Commission and announced that they were planning to sell the

club. Since one of the provisions of the 'Memo' was to give the Town the right of first refusal, he was asking the Town whether it wished to exercise that right. This set off a series of meetings on the Commission that went back and forth for two and a half months. Space doesn't allow me to recount all of the details of the meetings but the final vote came down to a vote of four to three to not exercise the option. As a matter of fact, if Commissioner Lou Pollock hadn't switched at the last minute, the Club would be under the control of the Town today.

What about this story that is relevant today is the fact that it was the "Memo of Understanding" that convinced the majority of the commissioners that it was safe to allow an outside ownership of the Club facilities.

The Lesser Organization had turned over to a wholly owned subsidiary group, the Shannon Corporation, the right to complete the deal. The mercurial Shane Eagan, president of Shannon, was at his most persuasive.

Protection Promised

Time and time again, he pointed out that the members were protected and that they, Shannon, intended to operate the Club the same way Arvida had been doing. The majority of the commissioners, knowing the 'Memo' covered almost all aspects of the operation, felt they were not exposing the 2,000 club members, almost all of whom were local residents to any peril, so they voted away their option. It also didn't hurt that Shannon employed one of the top law firms in Sarasota, Meshad and Syrett. Meshad was tough and Jimmy Syrett left the commissioners with the impression that if he didn't get his way, he might take out their heart and eat it in front of them. Almost immediately after the sale was completed, the Town was receiving reports that portions of the memo were being ignored. When Shane Eagan was questioned on this he said that the Shannon Group did not feel they had any obligation to be bound by the memo.



Their answer was that it was not a legal document because it had been passed in the Town Commission as a Resolution. If it were to have legal standing, it should have been handled as a Site plan Amendment.

This was a legal loophole that many including myself felt didn't just occur to the new owners. It seemed apparent that they had been advised of this 'out' while all the time telling the commissioners and members that they intended to operate the club in the same way as Arvida.

The end result is still too sad for me to think about. The Town sued. Our attorney had learned that Shannon was trying to secure a new lower interest loan but the bank had told them that no loan would be forthcoming until they had settled their legal problems.

Aided by a Commission bombarded by headlines about legal fees, in the middle of the summer with no one in town, the Commission settled the case and the Memo of Understanding was an unenforceable piece of paper.

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As of this writing, the Dock Owners Board has not made its decision as to whether it will exercise its option. If they do, things will remain the same and Longboat Key will still have its most charming restaurant available to the public. If they do not and if their decision is guided by promises of future action on the part of the new owners, they should remember George Santayana's axiom: "They that do not study history, will be forced to relive it"

Clarification

• A story in the Aug. 4 edition, "Chamber, Town Official Push Economic Development," said Town Officials met with the chamber of commerce. Commissioner George Spoll did meet with the Chamber wherein a friend of his explained the way an economic development council was developed and functioned in his town up north. Spoll was acting as a resident and not in the capacity of a Town Official during the discussion. The Chamber directors expressed interest and wish to explore the matter and gather more information.