



## The Latest News

*From Lois Wexler, Broward County Commissioner, District 5*

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### Message from the Commissioner

*A New Improved Newsletter*

Communication is essential to effective government.

Since it is your government, literally, it's our responsibility to provide you reliable information to help you form an opinion. And because it is your government, communication also means I need to hear from you to help me formulate decisions on tough issues, or just to alert me to your concerns. It's a two-way street: I want to tell you about what's happening that may change your life – and I need to know what's important to you.

Once every two months, this publication will examine one major issue. Obviously, this one will be about budget challenges. But there will be other helpful information in future issues ranging from new programs to help you cope with your own challenges to contact numbers for agencies that will deal with specific problems. Let me know what information would make this more useful to you.

Please share this newsletter by forwarding it to your friends or posting it on a condo bulletin board. If you want to be on the e-mail list, let me know at [district5@broward.org](mailto:district5@broward.org).

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## MAKING ENDS MEET: THE 2009 – 2010 BUDGET

The struggling economy has affected government just as it has affected every one of you. Just like you have done with your household budget, government must act responsibly and change how it spends the money you have entrusted us with.



Commissioners face the same limited options you do in developing the budget for the spending year that begins in October: increase the money coming in (raise taxes and fees), decrease how much we spend (cut services while increasing efficiencies), raid the savings account (take money from reserves) or some combination.

We are trying to do our part. During the past few years, we have sought expenses to cut and waste to eliminate. Certainly, there is more to uncover, but it takes time to identify and fix.

Immediately on the table is County Administrator Betha Henry's proposed budget. On August 18, commissioners will revise that proposal based in part on your advice about how you want your government to spend your money on your behalf. Then, we'll hold public hearings on September 10 and 22, likely approving the budget at the end of the second hearing.



## HARD TRUTHS

My preference is not to increase the County's portion of your overall tax bill – although it would be foolish to completely rule it out, yet. But that means reducing services while seeking more economical ways to operate.

While no one wants to cut too severely, here is the painful truth: Most people do not realize just how serious the budget crunch is. Even fewer realize how much worse it is about to become. This is crucial to understand.

Simply put, here's how it works: The proposed cuts being discussed today result from drops in property values during 2007 and the first half of 2008. The taxes based on those property values already have been collected over the past 12 months. That is what will fuel the budget starting this October.

But the worst of the plummet in property values – and the taxes based on them – occurred in the last half of 2008 and the current year. You know what that means: We will have even less income to pay for the budget beginning October 2010 – even if the economy instantly rebounds.

For that reason, I support deeper spending cuts now rather than surprising you with severe cuts a year from now. There still will be cuts next year, but we hope not as harsh.

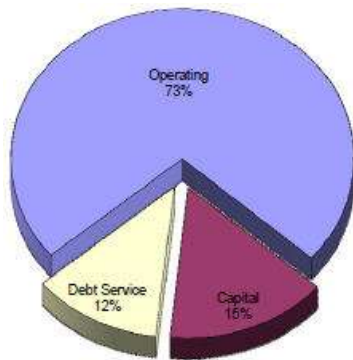
It would be politically popular to tell you that we can solve the problem with cuts that will only "inconvenience" us all. But that would be a lie, you deserve the truth from me.

We expect the changes will be temporary, but economists warn us that it will take years for the South Florida economy to rebuild itself to earlier levels. You and I have weathered worse trials. Working together, helping each other, respecting each other even when we disagree, we have survived and prevailed over previous economic downturns and devastating hurricanes.

We will get through this as well. *Together.*

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## WHAT'S ON THE TABLE?



Ms. Henry's proposed budget raises the rate at which your property is taxed, called millage.

The overall proposed budget is \$3.37 billion – down from this year's \$3.62 billion, requiring the county to spend \$250 million less.

It contains three major expenses: money to run county operations, 73 percent; money to pay off bonds and other debts, 12 percent; and capital funds for big ticket items such as construction, 15 percent.

Much of the income is property taxes, but some comes from fees for services, sales tax and income from self-supporting agencies, like Port Everglades and the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

The section of spending that gets the most attention is the General Fund, much like the checkbook you use to pay your monthly bills. That portion of the budget will be about \$1.3 billion.

While the commission approves the General Fund budget, it contains the separate budgets for the Property Appraiser, Supervisor of Elections and the Sheriff, whose one department accounts for nearly half of General Fund spending.

County departments have sliced \$55 million from the General Fund, approximately 10 percent overall – except for the Sheriff's department, which has balked at cutting its total spending the same percentage. Approximately \$46 million still needs to be cut from the Sheriff's \$722 million budget to avoid the proposed increase in the tax rate, according to the county administrator.

The commission has focused throughout the decade on keeping taxes low and finding efficiencies. The County's portion of your tax rate has decreased all but one year since the fall of 1999.

The General Fund budget has been cut in each of the past two years and the operating budget was cut more than \$100 million last year. More than 1,200 tax-supported staff positions have been cut over the past three years.

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## WILL MY TAXES GO UP?

This year's millage rate of 4.8889 mills simply means you pay about \$4.88 in taxes for every \$1,000 that the Broward County Property Appraiser says your home is worth after taking any exemption you're due. The county manager suggests raising that rate to 5.2163 mills. Even with the higher taxes, the county expects to collect \$42.7 million less due to declining property values.

Most commissioners, including myself, currently oppose a tax rate increase, but the law requires the county administrator to offer a balanced budget proposal. Since she drew up this proposal with the Sheriff refusing to make further cuts, this proposal contains a hike in the tax rate.

Under the proposed budget, some taxpayers would get a higher bill from the County, others a smaller bill. The difference depends on homestead exemptions, property values and the Save Our Homes Amendment, which has held down past tax hikes for long-time property owners.

About a third of taxpayers are long-term property owners with a homestead exemption. They would likely see an increase in taxes from \$537 to \$574 on a home with a taxable value of \$110,000.

The average short-term property owner with a homestead exemption would see a \$213 decrease on a home with taxable value of \$155,000, because property values on recently-purchased homes have dropped.

The average non-homestead residential property owner would see a \$158 drop in taxes.



## PROPOSED CUTS

County staff targeted several areas for cutting the overall budget by about \$251 million. At least \$98 million would be cut from the operating budget. About \$123 million would be cut from capital projects. Paying debt would cost \$15 million more.

Changes proposed by the county administrator include:

- Eliminate 523 positions – at least half requiring layoffs
- Require employees to take a five-day furlough, saving 100 positions (\$3.8 million)
- Close libraries on Sundays rather than shut entire branches for good (\$2.2 million)
- Close regional parks (excluding Tradewinds, Topeekeegee Yugnee, Markham, and Central Broward Regional Park) an additional day per week for 40 weeks per year (\$1.3 million); reopen on Tuesdays and Wednesdays during spring and summer breaks
- Contract out stable operations at Tradewinds Park and close the Markham Park pool (\$531,000)
- Eliminate the voluntary portion of the County's contribution to Tri-Rail (\$2.6 million)
- Reduce grants to some cultural programs by 15 percent (\$700,000)
- Reduce allocations for children services provided by non-profit organizations (\$700,000)
- Reduce funding for primary care services provided by the hospital districts (\$700,000)



## MORE INFORMATION

Detailed budget information is at [www.broward.org/2010budget](http://www.broward.org/2010budget). This Web site includes:

- **50-page “Budget-in-Brief” document covering the entire budget**
- **517-page operating budget**
- **43-page list of the proposed cuts to the operating budget**

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## NOW, WHAT DO YOU THINK?



Let me know what you think our budget priorities should be. Commissioners can never satisfy everyone's needs in this economic crunch. But I want your input on what should not be cut – and just as importantly, and where services can be trimmed, and where you see duplication or waste. Be as specific as possible; please don't just say "Don't touch libraries."

I need your advice immediately because we hold a crucial budget workshop on August 18, and commissioners need as much lead time as possible to affect the proposal. The most effective method to communicate with us is to e-mail your ideas to [district5@broward.org](mailto:district5@broward.org).

You also may address the commission at public hearings on September 10 and 22, preferably the first one, because few if any changes are made during the second.

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## SPEAKING YOUR MIND EFFECTIVELY

You don't have to be an experienced speaker to get your message across to policy makers at meetings or hearings. But many people waste the opportunity – even hurt their cause – by ignoring these simple guidelines.

- Never lose your temper at the podium. It is guaranteed to alienate the people you are trying to persuade and will destroy your credibility. No matter how justified your frustration, show officials the respect you want people to give you.
- Don't waste time rambling. Before the meeting, identify the points you want to make. Write down a few words to remind you of each. Even better, write out the whole speech to read at the meeting.
- Practice your speech until it flows smoothly. Time it to be sure you cover your essential points; you have only 3 minutes, sometimes less. Practice it in front of a mirror or a friend.
- Include specific examples, solutions or alternatives. They are far more effective than vague generalities.
- When you appear, say your name, address and who you represent.
- Some people need to speak a little more slowly than they expect because adrenaline unconsciously makes most people speak too quickly.

You should notify the mayor or chair in advance if you want to speak on a consent agenda item at a regular meeting. This can be simply a handwritten note before the meeting starts. That way, the chair knows to pull the item off the consent agenda for public comment.

If it is an item on the regular agenda or you are attending a public hearing, you do not need to notify anyone in advance, although it helps. Just raise your hand when the issue comes up during the meeting.



## HURRICANES 101 – 'TIS THE SEASON

We've just entered the most volatile period in the hurricane season and South Floridians know that a little preparation now pays off later if a severe storm strikes.

The most important lesson from Hurricane Wilma is crystal clear: Residents must stock supplies and make plans as if food, drinking water, power and even emergency help will not be available for three to five days.

To help, the County's Web Site and the 311 County Call Center have expanded their resources to aid your preparations. The page [www.broward.org/hurricane](http://www.broward.org/hurricane) is jammed with tools and tips -- in English as well as Spanish and Creole.

For instance, don't race days before a storm strikes seeking supplies that might not be available – and rack up a large bill all at once. The County offers an eight-week shopping checklist to slowly but surely accumulate your needs.

Another new part of the Web site lists gas stations and grocery stores that are equipped to operate with generator power from.

### ***Among many other tips:***

- Families should know where the closest shelter is to their home; two more have been added in Miramar and Pembroke Pines.
- If you likely will evacuate flood zones and areas near the coast, a packed suitcase should be left in a closet.
- The elderly and disabled should register their homes or apartments with the County so that first-responders know who may have difficulty notifying 911 for help after a storm passes.

## TELL US WHERE THE STORM DAMAGE IS

### ***The basic steps are:***

**Before a storm**, visit <http://www.broward.org/hurricane> and click on "Home Damage Assessment Program." Print the four photos depicting levels of damage and flooding (while you have power). Keep the photo page with other important documents in your hurricane kit.

**After the storm passes**, pick the number of the photo that best represents the condition of your home.

If you still have access to the Internet, report the number of the photo to [www.broward.org/hurricane](http://www.broward.org/hurricane). If you do not have Internet access, phone your report to the Hurricane Hotline by calling 3-1-1. Provide your address, city and zip code, and only the number of the picture that best represents the level of damage.

The report does not replace the official survey by assessment teams. But it will assist first-responders to identify areas with the greatest immediate need in the early hours and days after the storm.



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