



SPECIAL SESSION
Communicating effectively on
Florida's property tax reform debate

A communications toolkit for
Florida's 67 county governments

Prepared by the Florida Association of Counties

May 2007

Overview

Florida's 67 county governments are at a critical crossroads in the debate playing out in Tallahassee over how to reform Florida's current property tax system. Some state leaders have cast local governments as the villain in this issue. Indeed, some proposals would impose state-mandated caps on local government spending and cut billions of dollars that counties need to pay for critical local programs and services for our citizens.

As we head into a special session, it is essential for counties to effectively communicate how various proposals could hurt citizens at the local level. While various proposals impact individual counties in different ways, it is critical that Florida's 67 county governments speak with one voice on property tax reform.

What follows is a communications toolkit designed to assist Florida's counties in addressing the property tax reform issue with media, legislators, business and community leaders and the general public. Inside you will find key messages to help "frame" your discussions, tips on telling your county's story, fact sheets and other materials.

Much of the information in this toolkit is also provided online at www.fl-counties.com. Please visit our website regularly for up-to-date information.

With the special session slated for June 12-22, there are just a few short weeks for us to compile the data and effectively communicate to the public and the legislature the draconian impacts certain property tax proposals will have on your county. Over the next weeks, we are asking each county to assess the impacts and define the cuts to services in your county. Once your analysis is complete we are encouraging each county to implement any number of community events to raise awareness of these service cuts.

Table of Contents

1. Implementation Timeline
2. Menu of Implementation
 - Moving from \$s and %s
 - Public Hearings
 - Publication of cuts
 - Joint Resolution
 - Reach out to the Legislature
 - Community Speeches
 - Other Ideas
3. Message Implementation
 - Telling your county's story
 - Implementing key messages
4. Tools
 - Key Messages
 - FAC Official Position on Property Tax Reform
 - Property Tax Reform Question and Answers
 - Sample Speech
 - Sample Joint Resolution
 - Sample publication of cuts
 - Index of other tools available online at www.fl-counties.com

Legislative contact information:

- House of Representatives: speaker@myfloridahouse.gov
- Senate: propertytaxreform@flsenate.gov
- Governor: Charlie.crist@myflorida.com

For additional information, please contact:

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Implementation Timeline

May 7 – 11

Use this week to prepare:

- Analysis of impacts and reductions to services – programs, divisions and employees
- Lay out a schedule of events / actions your county will implement to educate the public on impacts of certain??? property tax proposals (It appears Governor Crist will hit the road with the plan he's already unveiled, while the House is getting set to issue something new next week – should we allude to these?)
- Schedule future meetings with your legislative delegations – don't forget to include your constitutional officers

May 14 – 18

Continue preparations

- Finalize analysis of impacts to services
- Compile detailed list of programs, divisions and positions reduced or eliminated
- Draft speeches, articles, OpEds or talking points for upcoming events
- Schedule Editorial Boards for week of June 4-8
- Schedule appearances before Rotary, Kiwanis, and other concerned citizen groups
- Schedule public hearing on your county budget and proposed cuts for May 28 – June 8

May 21 – 25

Finish preparations and begin implementation

- Publish list of impacts to services including reduction or elimination of programs, divisions and jobs. Publish on website, county bulletin board and release to media
- Focus special attention on cuts to public safety and to local social services agencies and non-profit community groups
- Deliver speeches to groups
- Meet with your legislative delegation

May 28 – June 8

Implementation

- Continue meeting with groups
- Meetings with legislative delegation
- Deliver letters to concerned citizens and users and supporters of community programs
- Host public hearing
- Meet with Editorial Boards
- Submit OpEd to paper
- Appear on local morning and noon time TV and radio programs

June 11

Pre-Session Kick Off

- Make final calls to legislators
- Be prepared to analyze new proposals

June 12 – 22

Session

Moving from \$s and %s – Analysis of Property Tax Proposals

It is important that we work with local county budget offices to ensure that the cuts they are predicting can be easily translated and understood by your county residents.

While understanding how much your county budget would be cut in dollar terms is important, the average person isn't budgeting for road maintenance or public safety in their household budget. It is important to clearly identify that \$1 million translates to certain and specific program reductions and eliminations, job cuts and layoffs. Few of us understand how much a road costs to build – so articulate which road projects will be delayed. Few of us understand how much it costs to operate special programs and it is important to put a face on these programs whether it is summer camp or law enforcement.

While clearly articulating the impact to services, it is also important to articulate what will no longer happen. If your county must delay plans to hire new personnel – whether that is park rangers or sheriff deputies – these freezes are equally important to the reduction or elimination of services.\

Additionally, counties routinely provide regular annual funding to a worthy array of local social services agencies and not-for-profit entities – these appropriations often support public health, mental health, recreation and the arts in your communities. It is important to identify any of these agencies that you will be forced to cut, and to enlist them as third-party advocates for the value of county government.

Public Hearings:

Involving the public is crucial to the debate regarding property tax relief. There are three general audiences for property tax reform:

1. Those who are suffering from inequities within the existing tax structure;
2. Anti-Tax / Anti-Government activists; and,
3. Concerned citizens who are actively involved in the services of local government, from the arts to public safety.

It is crucial that we engage all of these groups, especially our concerned citizens who are happy with the level of services they are receiving, because their opinion has not yet been heard in the property tax debate. Holding a public hearing will allow these groups to speak to you directly regarding their concerns over cuts in their county services.

Brevard County recently held a successful public hearing that brought out more than 300 people. Its success is due, in large part, to the steps they took to prepare for the meeting. Before hosting a property tax public hearing, please make sure to do the following.

1. Have all divisions within county government identify what cuts specifically would be made to their programs and personnel prior to that meeting.
2. Have those divisions email their proposed cuts in services to any of their advisory boards, concerned citizens or volunteers.
3. As a county, publish the entire list of programs, divisions and staff that would be cut or eliminated due to projected ad valorem reductions. Ensure the publication of such a list would reach many of your citizens.
4. With a week of such publication or communication, host a forum where commissioners can listen to the public concerns regarding cuts in services and the need for property tax reform.

Publication of Cuts:

Identify and publish for the community the impact of property tax proposals on county services. Be specific – name the programs, number of staff positions eliminated, reduced hours, closed public buildings, etc. Contact the users of those programs and educate them on the impacts while encouraging them to contact their legislator to achieve fair and equitable property tax relief without causing a second crisis at the local level.

Joint Resolution:

Draft (FAC can draft one for you) and pass a resolution outlining your County Commission's concerns regarding certain property tax proposals and as clearly as possible outline the expected cuts from those property tax plans. Forward that resolution to the legislator and governor along with your local media.

Reach out to the Legislature:

Ultimately, it will be up to your local legislative delegation members to decide whether to vote for or against proposed bills that could hurt your county. It is important to engage your local legislators throughout the special session on how various proposals might impact citizens back home.

Visit your legislator

- Put together a delegation of local officials, the sheriff, community and business leaders, citizens, not-for-profit leaders and constitutional officers to visit your legislators in Tallahassee or their district offices.
- Provide them with real-time feedback on the fiscal and program impacts of proposals being hashed in the Capitol.

Write the legislature and governor

- Ask advisory groups, volunteers and citizen activists to contact the Florida House of Representatives, Florida Senate and governor regarding the devastating impacts certain rollback years would hold for their programs. Feel free to contact individual legislators and/or direct emails to:
 - House of Representatives: speaker@myfloridahouse.gov
 - Senate: propertytaxreform@flsenate.gov
 - Governor: Charlie.crist@myflorida.com
- Consider coordinating with your volunteers to all call or write at the same time on a particular day. It is an effective way of making an impression on your legislator as well as ensuring that volunteers write.

Please, work with your county's lobbyist—if you have one—to determine the informational needs of legislators and the voices in your community who might influence them.

Community Speeches:

Encourage your commissioners and senior team to speak with local civic organizations regarding concerns over certain property tax proposals while outlining not just in dollars but in actual programs, services and job freezes or losses what these cuts would mean to county government.

Website:

The web is an inexpensive and critical tool for outlining the impacts of property tax relief proposals. On the web you can not only provide the summaries of the information your county is releasing but also the detailed analysis of your budget office and the important conclusions they have drawn.

Consider setting up surveys on your website that ask citizens to weigh in on property tax reform and the cuts they are willing to accept and/or suggest.

Other:

- Send out letters to participants in your recreation programs from soccer to summer camps informing them of the impacts cuts may have on that program.
- Consider reaching out to different beat reporters, for example, a social reporter that could cover the impacts of devastating cuts from a human interest story and how a wide variety of citizens could be impacted the loss of certain services. Contact your business reporter and encourage them to write on the economic impacts such a cut could have on your community.

Telling Your County's Story

Tips for influencing local audiences on the property tax reform debate

There's an old adage that "all politics are local." Nothing could be truer than when it comes to how your county—and the 66 others in Florida—can positively influence the property tax reform debate playing out in Tallahassee.

Simply put, the greatest pressure that Florida's counties can bring to bear on this issue is to engage and educate local audiences on how state-imposed revenue and spending caps or other proposals that erode your county's tax base—will seriously challenge local control and harm your ability to provide crucial services for your county's residents.

What follows are some tips for successfully swaying this debate in your communities.

Your Audiences

In conducting local outreach, focus on the following audiences:

- Local media, county beat reporters, columnists and editorial boards;
- Local legislative delegation members;
- Other county officers who provide essential community services, such as sheriffs and heads of public health, transportation, housing, transportation, parks and libraries.
- Other stakeholders, such as non-governmental agencies that rely on county support, recipients of county services, community and business leaders.

Your Key Messages

It is critical that counties speak with consistency in framing the challenges posed by these property tax reform proposals. Review and use the key messages provided in this toolkit to serve as a "foundation" for the remarks that you make to key audiences. Go back to these key messages repeatedly in your discussions. These messages are:

Relief without a second crisis

- Citizens need property tax relief, but not by creating a second crisis through forcing cuts in essential county programs and services they depend on.

Cuts to local services are real

- Counties provide crucial everyday support for Florida's citizens and property tax dollars have been spent responsibly. Proposed cuts will impact REAL local services such as deputies, emergency management as well as social services.

Growth demands services

- *The continued growth throughout the state puts pressure on counties and their elected officials to expand programs and services, which requires new revenue.*

Part of the solution

- Florida's county's support all of our citizens and are an important part of any solution. Counties have offered alternative solutions to help taxpayers.

Additionally, emphasize that state proposals further erode *local control* over the ability of local elected officials and citizens to make local decisions on how local property tax dollars are raised and used to pay for local programs. Challenge a one-size-fits-all, Tallahassee solution handed down to counties.

Packaging Your Story

County Commissioners and their staffs cannot alone effectively shape this debate. There is power in real-time data that details specific cuts that counties could face, and in encouraging other voices to speak up with you in concern. Here are some thoughts for packaging your story:

- Enlist other elected county officials, such as your sheriff, to share the concern of how cuts could hurt your community.
- Identify local community or business leaders willing to speak out for counties.
- Identify local programs and services provided by the county that could be endangered by the current legislative proposals, and ask recipients of those programs to join you in speaking out. Pay special attention to social services agencies or not-for-profit entities that could lose critical grants they depend on from county government.

Reaching Out to Media

Your local media is an important conduit in providing information to local constituents and local legislative delegation members in how Tallahassee proposals could hurt your community. As a result, it is crucial that you establish and maintain ongoing contact with local media throughout the debate on this issue. Here are some tips on media outreach:

- Brief your local county reporters on how your county's property tax dollars are spent and provide them with regular updates on how legislative proposals could harm your county. Give them specifics in terms of potential revenue loss and programs for citizens that could be impacted.
- Ask for a meeting with the editorial boards of your local newspapers, and establish ongoing discussions with the editorial writer who is covering the property tax issue. *Ask the editorial board to support counties against a state-imposed cap. Ask them if you can submit an opinion piece setting out your county's concerns.*
- Don't go it alone. As discussed earlier, ask your sheriff or other county officials, and community and business leaders who understand this challenge, to speak to the media with you.
- Remember to focus on the local citizens you are serving. Identify citizens who are in programs or receiving services that could face cuts, and encourage them to speak up. Consider holding media events at libraries, social service agencies, affordable housing communities, public health departments, etc., where the actual impact of cuts would be felt.
- Communicate regularly with the Florida Association of Counties on your media outreach plans and county officials or others in your community who want to speak out. Coordination of effort will help counties to be most effective.
- Forward any publicly released documents to Florida Association of Counties for reference materials and possible release to legislators and capitol press corps.

How to Use the Key Messages and Their Rationale

As part of this toolkit, you have received a two-page document titled “Key messages: 2007 Florida Legislative Session.” What follows is a brief guide for how to use the messages and the rationale behind the messages.

Why Use Key Messages?

While property tax reform proposals impact individual counties in different ways, it is important that Florida’s 67 counties speak with “one voice” in framing this debate. Key messages help to provide the listener/viewer/reader with a framework for understanding the counties’ position on this issue—a “headline” and “lead paragraph” if you will.

Substantial communications research has documented that three or four key messages are optimum in most communications efforts. If county officials use these messages repeatedly in various forums, they will be internalized by the listener and then repeated to others.

Simply put, if county officials don’t frame the property tax debate using messages, the recipient (media, legislators, general public) will listen to the myriad facts that we can offer and *decide for themselves* what the key message is. In other words, *key messages help us to proactively shape the debate and public’s understanding.*

Messages should always be:

- Simple
- Memorable
- Credible
- Resonate with audiences

How Are These Key Messages Structured?

You will see that each of the three messages has three elements:

- Theme
- Message
- Supporting points

The “theme” is a short phrase to help the county official have quick recall of the “message.” (The message is only as good as the deliverer’s ability to remember it). The “message” is the headline we want to deliver. The “supporting points” are facts, anecdotes, data, etc., that help to illustrate and bolster the message. Thus, county officials can substitute local impacts data or other information as supporting points to the messages if they wish.

What Are Our Key Messages?

The four initial key messages for Florida’s counties for the 2007 legislative session are:

- 1. Theme:** **Relief without a second crisis**
Message: *Citizens need property tax relief, but not by creating a second crisis through forcing cuts in essential county programs and services they depend on.*

2. Theme: Cuts to local services are real

Message: Counties provide crucial everyday support for Florida's citizens and property tax dollars have been spent responsibly. Proposed cuts will impact REAL local services such as deputies, emergency management as well as social services.

3. Theme: Growth demands services

Messages: *The continued growth throughout the state puts pressure on counties and their elected officials to expand programs and services, which requires new revenue.*

4. Theme: Part of the solution

Message: *Florida's counties provide support to all Florida citizens and are an important part of any solution. Our alternative solutions will help all taxpayers.*

What's the Rationale for the Messages?

Theme/message 1 acknowledges that Florida's current property tax system is creating inequity and pain for some taxpayers. But it cautions that the answer is not to hurt those very same taxpayers by hampering local services for them.

Theme/message 2 educates audiences on the range of services that counties provide and that certain property tax proposals will result in deep cuts to county services.

Theme/message 3 addresses Florida's ongoing explosive growth and demand for services, and how it necessitates increased spending.

Theme/message 4 affirms that Florida's counties are closely bound to all citizens and are an important voice in solving this crisis. It also addresses that we have proactively offered solutions.

Do's and Don'ts in Delivering the Messages

- DO use the messages frequently in all communications on this issue.
- DO consider the messages your "outline" for framing how your county—and Florida's 66 other counties—feel about the potentially devastating impacts of some of the Legislature's proposals.
- DO start all discussions/interviews, etc., on the issue by delivering the messages—then go back to them throughout your remarks and close with them.
- DON'T use phrases like "my messages are" in your communications—simply deliver the messages.
- DON'T wait for your audience to coax the messages out of you—deliver them proactively.

**Florida Association of Counties
Key Messages
2007 Florida Legislative Session**

Theme: Relief without a second crisis

Message: *Citizens need property tax relief, but not by creating a second crisis through forcing cuts in essential county programs and services they depend on.*

Supporting Points:

- Many homeowners, renters, landlords and businesses are hurting, because Florida's property tax structure is broken and must be fixed.
- While well-intentioned, 1992's Save Our Homes Amendment has had severe consequences over time: It has shifted a disproportionate share of the tax burden to businesses and renters, "locked" people into their current homes, and created vast discrepancies in the tax bills of similarly-valued homes.
- The Florida Association of Counties (FAC) supports carefully weighed, responsible solutions that improve equity and fairness among taxpayers. Simply put, citizens in similar circumstances should pay similar tax bills. Hastily constructed "political sound bite" solutions will only intensify Florida's property tax crisis.
- Proposals in the Florida Legislature would spark a second crisis by eliminating hundreds of millions of dollars in funding for essential county programs and services that our citizens demand and depend on.
- Doubling the homestead exemption to \$50,000 would eliminate more than \$600 million from county budgets statewide. This would especially hurt Florida's 32 rural counties—some already at the 10 mill cap—in their efforts to provide essential services such as law enforcement, fire protection, jails, court systems, parks and roads.
- The proposal to make Save Our Homes portable is likely unconstitutional, according to legal scholars. Existing law says newcomers who become permanent Florida residents must be treated the same as other residents of the state.
- County governments have provided property tax relief to citizens. In 2006, two-thirds of Florida's 67 counties reduced millage rates, resulting in more than \$500 million in savings to taxpayers. In 2005, nearly half of the counties reduced millage rates, result in \$185 million in savings to taxpayers. (Insert local savings examples here.)

Theme: Cuts to local services are real

Message: Counties provide crucial everyday support for Florida's citizens and property tax dollars have been spent responsibly. Proposed cuts will impact REAL local services such as deputies, emergency management as well as social services.

Supporting Points:

- County governments play an increasingly important role in the lives of citizens as our population grows, citizens seek a higher quality of life, and federal and state governments push more responsibility for paying for programs onto counties.
- Proposed cuts in Tallahassee would impact urban and rural counties in vastly different ways but one thing is clear – many proposals offer cuts deep enough to dramatically affect law enforcement and other public safety programs.

- As political subdivisions of the state, counties are required by the state to provide certain basic services, such as: *public safety* (including sheriffs, fire and rescue, and building inspection); *public welfare* (including medical help for the needy, affordable housing and environmental protection); and *transportation* (including road construction and maintenance, right-of-way acquisitions, and drainage systems.) In recent years, state leaders have added to counties' fiscal burden by mandating they help pay for programs, or fund them outright. For example, counties have paid for an increasing share of Medicaid costs, for state juvenile justice programs and for coverage for the uninsured. (Insert local examples of state funding mandates here).
- Likewise, the federal government also imposes mandates on county government ranging from environmental issues and voter regulations to welfare disabilities and labor requirements. (Insert local examples of federal mandates here).
- Beyond basic services and mandates, citizens also look to counties to provide a range of other services that add to quality of life in Florida's communities. For example, counties provide their citizens with basic utilities, public transportation, parks, libraries, and other infrastructure.

Theme: **Growth demands services**

Message: *The continued growth experienced throughout the state puts pressure on counties and their elected officials to expand programs and services which require new revenue.*

Supporting Points:

- Between 2001 and 2006, Florida's counties saw a 68 percent growth statewide in property tax revenues. What happened to this money? About 34 percent of county spending was directly attributable to population growth and inflation (both rose 17 percent), and included required infrastructure improvements. The rest of the spending was concentrated in five large budget categories: law enforcement, corrections, general government, parks, and health and human services.
- Like many private businesses, counties are also seeing expenses in areas such as employee health insurance, pension obligations, fuel costs, construction and property insurance that are rising faster than the Consumer Price Index.

Theme: **Part of the solution**

Message: *Florida's counties support all of our citizens and play an important part of any solution. Our alternative solutions will help all taxpayers.*

Supporting points:

- Florida's counties support all citizens across our state every day and must have a seat at the table in resolving the current property tax dilemma.
- We support reasonable limits on property tax assessment increases, but oppose any state-mandated caps on county revenue or spending. Florida's citizens want tax and spending decisions made locally—they don't want a "one size fits all" solution on property taxes handed down from Tallahassee that will make things worse.
- We support relief for businesses by providing a \$25,000 exemption per taxpayer on Tangible Personal Property Taxes.
- We support an annual assessment limit of 10 percent on all non-homestead properties with revaluation upon change of ownership or use of the property. A 10 percent cap will even-out assessments and taxes over time. A lower cap would be inequitable to newcomers to Florida, including new businesses.

- We also support and encourage decisions made by individual County Commissions—such as the recent actions in Hillsborough, Sarasota, Broward and Miami-Dade Counties—to debate and implement self-imposed revenue or spending caps. This is the essence of “home rule” —local government, not Tallahassee, knows best what local citizens want and is in the best position to make such decisions.
- While recognizing our citizens need property tax relief, we believe any major statewide changes to the property tax system should be considered by the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission—not rushed to voters as a special election ballot. The Tax and Budget Reform Commission was approved by Florida voters and created in the state constitution to do a comprehensive review of our state’s tax and budget policies. A special election would preempt the work of this commission.



Florida Association of Counties Official Position on the Property Tax Issue

Summary Statement: As an overriding goal of reforming Florida's Property Tax Structure, the Florida Association of Counties supports responsible solutions that improve equity and fairness among classes of taxpayers, as well as individual taxpayers. Florida's counties support reasonable limits on property tax assessment increases. Counties oppose caps on local government expenditures/revenues, as well as modifications to the property tax structure that erode the existing tax base.

What FAC Wants You to Know:

- Fairness and equity are fundamental principles for reasonable taxation. These principles do not exist in Florida's property tax structure today. Persons in similar circumstances should face similar burdens.
- County governments statewide have provided property tax relief to taxpayers through millage rate reductions. In 2006, two-thirds of Florida counties reduced millage rates, resulting in more than \$500 million in savings to taxpayers. In 2005, nearly half of the counties reduced millage rates, resulting in \$185 million in savings to taxpayers.
- The proposed doubling of the homestead exemption to \$50,000 would eliminate more than \$600 million from county budgets statewide. This reduction will significantly hamper the ability of small counties, already at the 10 mill cap, to provide essential services to citizens.
- Legal analysis of the portability of the Save Our Homes cap finds the practice to be unconstitutional on the basis that it violates a citizen's constitutional "Right to Travel." Legal precedence establishes that newcomers who elect to become permanent residents have the right to be treated like other residents of that state.
- Florida's counties support relief for businesses by providing a \$25,000 exemption per business taxpayer on Tangible Personal Property Taxes.

Florida's counties support an annual assessment limitation of 10 percent on all non-homestead properties with revaluation upon change of ownership or use of the property. The 10 percent cap will even out assessments and taxes over time. A lower cap will be inequitable to newcomers to Florida, including new businesses.

Finding a Solution: Placing proposed constitutional tax reforms on a special election ballot would **preempt the work of the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission**, a commission approved by Florida voters and created in the state constitution.

The sole purpose of the commission is to conduct a comprehensive and global analysis of local and state revenues and expenditures and to recommend appropriate remedies as needed.

Difficult decisions about the state tax structure must be made to restore equity and balance to Florida's property tax structure. Any substantial and far-reaching modifications should be deferred to this commission to ensure the proposals receive sufficient study and deliberation to ascertain the full impacts of property tax reform measures.

#

Q&A on the Property Tax Reform Issue

Floridians are demanding property tax relief. What position on this does the Florida Association of Counties take?

The Florida Association of Counties (FAC) supports carefully weighed, responsible solutions that insure equity and fairness among taxpayers. Citizens need property tax relief, but not by creating a second crisis through forcing cuts in essential county programs and services they depend on.

What is the FAC stance on the proposal to cap local governments' revenues?

The Florida Association of Counties strongly opposes any move by the Legislature to statutorily cap the revenues that local governments can raise to pay for crucial programs and services for our citizens. Such a cap would force counties to make deep cuts to programs and services that our citizens want and expect, and could harm quality of life in our communities.

What about reducing millage rates?

Florida's counties recognize that citizens need property tax relief – in 2006, two-thirds of the state's 67 county governments voluntarily reduced millage rates, resulting in more than \$500 million in savings to taxpayers statewide. And in 2005, nearly half of the counties reduced millage rates, resulting in savings of \$185 million for taxpayers. But in attempting to craft relief, the Legislature must avoid creating a second crisis by forcing cuts in essential county programs and services that our citizens depend on.

Other proposals call for increasing the homestead exemption or expanding Save Our Homes. Are these viable options?

Doubling the homestead exemption to \$50,000 would eliminate more than \$600 million from county budgets statewide. This would especially hurt Florida's 32 rural counties – some already at the 10 mill cap – in their efforts to provide essential services.

The proposal to make Save Our Homes portable is likely unconstitutional, according to legal scholars. Existing law says newcomers who become permanent Florida residents must be treated the same as other residents of the state.

Why has government become so expensive?

Counties provide crucial everyday support for Florida's citizens and are spending property tax dollars responsibly, despite the pressures of growth, citizen expectations and mandates. County governments play an increasingly important role in the lives of citizens as our population grows, citizens seek a higher quality of life, and federal and state governments push more responsibility for paying for programs onto counties.

As political subdivisions of the state, counties are required by the state to provide certain basic services, such as: public safety (including sheriffs, fire and rescue, and building inspection); public welfare (including medical help for the needy, affordable housing and environmental protection); and transportation (including road construction and maintenance, right-of-way acquisitions, and drainage systems).

What is the effect of unfunded mandates?

In recent years, state leaders have added to counties' fiscal burden by mandating they help pay for programs, or fund them outright. For example, counties have paid for an increasing share of Medicaid costs, for state juvenile justice programs and for coverage for the uninsured.

Likewise, the federal government also imposes mandates on county government ranging from environmental, landfill, and voter regulations to welfare disabilities and labor requirements.

This all totals up to almost \$1 billion annually that counties statewide must take out of their coffers.

What has happened to all this money coming in?

Between 2001 and 2006, Florida's counties saw a 68 percent growth statewide in property tax revenues. What happened to this money? About 34 percent of county spending was directly attributable to population growth and inflation (both rose 17 percent), and included required infrastructure improvements. The rest of the spending was concentrated in five large budget categories: law enforcement, corrections, general government, parks, and health and human services.

Beyond basic services and mandates, citizens also look to counties to provide a range of other services that add to quality of life in Florida's communities. For example, counties provide their citizens with basic utilities, public transportation, libraries, and other infrastructure.

What does FAC recommend?

Limits On Assessment Increases—We support reasonable limits on property tax assessment increases, but oppose any state-mandated caps on county revenue or spending. Florida's citizens want tax and spending decisions made locally – they don't want a "one size fits all" solution on property taxes handed down from Tallahassee that will make things worse.

Tangible Tax Exemption—We support relief for businesses by providing a \$25,000 exemption per business taxpayer on Tangible Personal Property Taxes.

Annual Assessment Level—We support an annual assessment limit of 10 percent on all non-homestead properties with revaluation upon change of ownership or use of the property. A 10 percent cap will even-out assessments and taxes over time. A lower cap would be inequitable to newcomers to Florida, including new businesses.

Responsible Local Government—We also support and encourage decisions made by individual County Commissions—such as the recent actions in Hillsborough, Sarasota, Broward and Miami-Dade Counties—to debate and implement self-imposed revenue or spending caps. This is the essence of "home rule" —local government, not Tallahassee, knows best what local citizens want and is in the best position to make such decisions.

Use The Existing System For Change—While recognizing our citizens need property tax relief, we believe any major statewide changes to the property tax system should be considered by the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission—not rushed to voters as a special election ballot. The Tax and Budget Reform Commission was approved by Florida voters and created in the state constitution to do a comprehensive review of our state's tax and budget policies. A special election would preempt the work of this commission.

Florida Association of Counties Template Speech

***Please and insert local content where desired**

Thank you for your time today. I'd like to spend a few minutes discussing a topic that's incredibly important to our citizens and to our county—Florida's current property tax system.

I am sure you're reading the headlines coming out of Tallahassee every day on various proposals to reform our property tax system. And believe me, there's not a day that goes by that I don't speak to someone in our community about the unfairness and inequity in our current system.

The outcome of the debate this summer in the state Legislature will have a direct impact on you and your family and on the ability of your county government to provide crucial programs and services in our community.

With that in mind, I'd like to share with you the perspective of our county—and the 66 other county governments across the state—on the property tax reform proposals being debated by our state lawmakers.

Fundamentally, there are three things I'd like you to know:

- First, Florida's counties believe that our citizens need property tax relief—but not by creating a second crisis through forcing cuts in essential county programs and services that you and your neighbors depend on.
- Second, Florida's counties are providing crucial everyday support for our citizens and are spending property tax dollars responsibly. And REAL programs you use and support will likely be reduced and or eliminated all together if politicians in Tallahassee have their way.
- And third, Florida's counties provide support to all our state's property owners, and are an important part of any solution that is forged in Tallahassee. And, counties have offered alternative solutions to ease the property tax burden on businesses and non-homesteaders.

While it was well-intentioned, there's no doubt that the 1992 Save Our Homes amendment has resulted in severe consequences over time: It has shifted a disproportionate share of the tax burden to businesses

and renters, “locked” people into their current homes, and created vast discrepancies in the tax bills of similarly-valued homes.

So, what do Florida’s 67 counties—collectively working together as the Florida Association of Counties—support? We support carefully weighed, responsible solutions that improve equity and fairness among taxpayers. Simply put, we believe that citizens in similar circumstances should pay similar property tax bills.

Florida’s counties *do not* support hasty, “political sound-bite” solutions from the state that further erode local control and that will only worsen this situation.

Please understand, proposals currently being debated in the Legislature would spark a second crisis by eliminating hundreds of millions of dollars—even billions—of funding for programs and services you and other citizens use every day.

For example:

- The Governor’s proposal to double the homestead exemption to \$50,000 would eliminate more than \$600 million from county budgets statewide. **(insert local content)**
- The House Leadership’s proposal to impose a statutory roll-back of rates on July 1 would cut \$3.6 billion in county taxes statewide, and could only be overruled in individual counties by a unanimous vote of the County Commission. **(insert local content)**

Understand that, as political subdivisions of the state, Florida’s counties are *required* to provide basic services in our communities. In the area of public safety, we must provide sheriffs, jails and building inspectors. In the area of public welfare, we must provide medical help for the needy, affordable housing and environmental protection. And in the area of transportation, we must pay for county road construction and drainage projects.

In recent years, state leaders have added to counties’ fiscal burden by mandating they help pay for programs, or pick up the entire tab. For example counties have paid an increasing share of Medicaid costs, for state juvenile justice programs and to cover the health costs of the uninsured.

There are, of course, myriad other programs and services that counties provide that enhance quality of life for our citizens.

And we should not overlook the financial impact of hurricanes, tornadoes and other storms on our counties – the outcome of which can not be budgeted for.

But some of the property tax reform proposals being debated in Tallahassee would seriously threaten our ability to continue some of these essential programs. Ask yourself – which of these programs can our county do without?

Understand, counties *have* listened to the will of the people as property values and tax collections rose in recent years. In 2006, two-thirds of the state's 67 county's reduced their millage rates, resulting in *more than a half billion dollars in savings* to local taxpayers. And in 2005, nearly half of the counties reduced millage rates, resulting in savings of \$185 million for taxpayers. **(insert local content)**

In this politically-charged debate, some state leaders have tried to blame local governments for the current pain felt by some property taxpayers. These state officials have accused county governments of wildly spending additional tax revenues.

That's a disingenuous argument. Over the past five years, population growth and inflation have alone accounted for 34 percent of additional county spending. The rest has been dedicated to important areas such as law enforcement and corrections, other government programs, parks, and health and human services.

Additionally, counties have used additional revenues to bolster their reserves to pay disaster response costs when the next hurricane hits. And like our citizens and local businesses, counties have faced rapidly escalating costs for things like employee health insurance, pension obligations, fuel costs, construction and property insurance.

It is perplexing to your county commissioners that as radical proposals have emerged in Tallahassee, state leaders have solicited little input from counties on the real impacts of cuts on citizens back home.

But fundamentally, Florida counties provide support to all our citizens and are an important part on any solution. And, the Florida Association of Counties has offered alternative solutions to this problem:

- We support reasonable limits on property tax assessment increases, but we oppose any state-mandated caps on revenue or spending. Citizens want their local governments to decide how to spend local property tax dollars—not the state.
- We support the ability of individual County Commission to impose their own limits on revenue or spending, based on what their constituents want.
- We support relief for businesses by providing a \$25,000 exemption per taxpayer on Tangible Personal Property Taxes for things like office computers and other equipment.
- We support an annual assessment limit of 10 percent on all non-homestead properties, with revaluation when ownership or use of the property changes. A lower cap would be inequitable to newcomers.
- And we believe that any major statewide changes to Florida property tax system should be considered by the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, which was approved by voters and placed in the state constitution. Let the Commission do its work, starting this fall. A rushed solution, hatched in the legislative session and put to special election, could worsen our situation.

In closing, Florida's 67 counties are working hard to provide the programs and services our citizens want and need, and counties want a seat at the table as reforms are being debated.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

HOW WILL PROPERTY TAX REFORM AFFECT YOU?

Brevard County would be forced to slash up to \$76 million from its property tax budget for the upcoming fiscal year if lawmakers in Tallahassee approve property tax reform proposals.

To cut that much, dramatic and drastic program and service reductions would have to occur in virtually every county department and office.

- Reduce hours at community & senior centers
- Eliminate aquatics programs
- Disband 4-H youth programs
- Reduce night field and court lighting at parks
- Eliminate school crossing guards
- Eliminate evening & weekend bus services
- Eliminate summer camps and special programs for children
- Close animal care center
- Close dog parks
- Eliminate the literacy program
- Eliminate the mobile library
- Reduce library operation hours by 29%
- Eliminate evening & weekend library hours
- Eliminate Palm Bay library replacement
- Eliminate Mims/Scottsmoor library replacements
- Eliminate construction of Rockledge library
- Eliminate Suntree/Viera library additions
- Eliminate volunteer firefighter program
- Eliminate funding for Brevard Cultural Alliance
- Discontinue maintenance of roadside and drainage ditches
- Eliminate storm protection beach project
- Discontinue wildlife management and protection for scrub jays, manatees, gopher tortoises and sea turtles
- Eliminate the derelict vessel removal program of abandoned boats in the county waterways
- Eliminate beach renourishment projects
- Reduce emergency financial assistance to families for rent, utilities or prescriptions
- Reduce services to seniors, the homeless, and people with disabilities.
- Reduce roadway resurfacing, drainage, paving, and landscaping projects
- Reduce drainage ditch cleanings from annually to every three years
- Eliminate security services at county courthouses
- Reduce janitorial services
- Discontinue televising of Metropolitan Planning Organization, Board of Adjustment, Local Planning Agency, and Planning & Zoning board meetings
- Postpone sewer project for Merritt Island
- Eliminate funding of 211 emergency information service for citizens
- Eliminate drug/alcohol testing program
- Reduce retiree subsidy for group health insurance
- Eliminate scheduled repairs of parking lots, beach crossovers, walkways, pavilions, roofs and park entrance signs
- Close parks that are not used frequently
- Eliminate golf course repairs and improvements
- Limit the use of athletic facilities
- Eliminate special events unless fully funded by attendance fees
- Reduce agriculture/horticulture support for lawns, gardens and farms
- Eliminate spay/neuter rebate assistance program
- Discontinue nuisance wildlife trapping program
- Eliminate animal cruelty investigation section
- Eliminate Guardian Ad Litem program
- Reduce funding for indigent access to health care, including dental and maternity programs
- Reduce funding for veterans services
- Reduce environmental code enforcement
- Reduce county ordinance code enforcement
- Discontinue installation and maintenance of channel markers
- Discontinue installation of fiber optic cable for traffic signal coordination
- Eliminate Port St John and North Merritt Island dependent special district boards for community review of zoning applications
- Eliminate mailed courtesy notices of planning and zoning hearings

The Board of County Commissioners is conducting a meeting to discuss the projected \$76 million in reductions to programs and services at 5 pm on Tuesday, May 1 at the Commission Chambers, 2725 Judge Fran Jamieson Way, Viera.

• Contact information for your local legislators:

Sen. Bill Posey	posey.bill.s24@flsenate.gov	321-690-3484
Sen. Mike Haridopolos	haridopolos.mike.s26@flsenate.gov	321-752-3131
Rep. Ralph Poppell	ralph.poppell@myfloridahouse.gov	321-383-5151
Rep. Thad Altman	thad.altman@myfloridahouse.gov	321-752-3138
Rep. Mitch Needelman	mitch.needelman@myfloridahouse.gov	321-984-4848
Rep. Bob Allen	bob.allen@myfloridahouse.gov	321-449-5111
Rep. Stan Mayfield	stan.mayfield@myfloridahouse.gov	772-778-5077

Your city services may also be affected by the proposed tax reform.

