

Editorial

OUR OPINION

A new look for Hillsborough

*Submitted into the "Record" 7/30/2010
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Charter Review Board*

Acting Hillsborough County Administrator Mike Merrill's methodical approach to a difficult budget contrasts markedly with former Administrator Pat Bean's ham-fisted handling of last year's \$110 million shortfall.

Merrill's performance should reassure commissioners, who fired Bean last week, and the public that the county is now on the right track.

Last year, Bean proposed across-the-board cuts that eliminated many key services. Commissioners were barraged by angry citizens, who not only protested the cuts but who offered cost-cutting alternatives the county had not considered. The commission adopted many of them.

Bean also tried to blame the county's budget problems on the sheriff's office, whose budget she does not control. But Sheriff David Gee had aggressively cut spending and returned more than \$40 million to the county. The attempt to shift blame annoyed Gee and embarrassed commissioners.

Faced with a \$65 million budget shortfall this year, Merrill responded differently.

He sought to make moves that would cut waste and bolster productivity.

He cut more than 240 jobs, most of which were unfilled positions. Other money-saving steps included paying off debt, limiting overtime to emergen-



Merrill

cies and undertaking dozens of austerity measures — from eliminating color printers to limiting uniform reimbursements.

Even more important, he has begun a year-long comprehensive review of all operations to determine how the county can improve efficiency and eliminate duplication. This should make next year's budget less challenging.

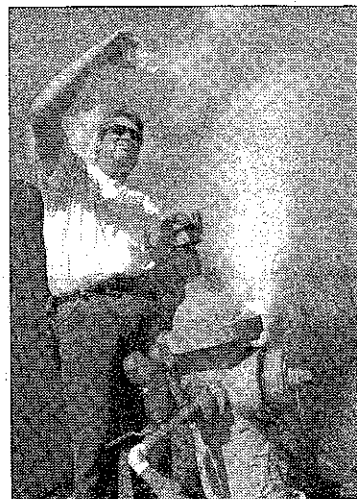
Merrill understands the county is likely to face lean budgets for years to come. Rather than engaging in a yearly financial scramble, he wants to downsize government without undermining key services.

He recognized the effectiveness of Gee's cost-cutting practices and is starting a "Process Improvement Team" similar to the sheriff's that will scrutinize existing practices and determine if changes are needed.

Cost cutting is a goal, but Merrill says, "These are things we should be doing anyway."

He's already planning to have agencies share administrative resources, reduce the number of public information officers and have more interagency collaboration.

For instance, one idea is to have the county's water-me-



Staff file photo

ter readers who frequently visit neighborhoods to report code violations to the code enforcement department. This would bolster enforcement while reducing the need for random patrols.

Privatizing certain services will be considered.

Merrill intends to have citizens and employees participate in the review. He says he is already hearing smart ideas from employees. Hillsborough government is going to be in for some major restructuring, but he stresses, "We want to go about this in a calm, rational way."

That would be a big improvement over the recent annual budget scrambles. And a leaner, more efficient county government would benefit county taxpayers for years to come.