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## On The Mark: Saving taxes by counting all inventory

By Mark Strain

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The yearly budget process has begun for Collier County government and despite the doom and gloom scenarios about how difficult it will be due to Tallahassee's mandatory tax cuts, the expansion via the budget process in Collier County still continues.

It started, last week, with the Annual Update and Inventory Report (AUIR), which is the blue print for determining next year's spending budget. This year, the programs are just as aggressive as in prior years, untouched by the Tallahassee tax cuts or the decline in real estate sales.

Every resident is surely aware of the changes that have occurred in our local economy over the past two years. The residential real estate market is in the dumps and the giddy prices of 2005 will not be seen again for a very long time. For awhile, it seemed that the commercial real estate market could carry the area during the residential downturn, but anyone driving around will notice the overwhelming number of vacant commercial store fronts throughout the county.

Despite what business economists want to portray, the real estate market may not have reached bottom and when it does turn around, it will likely make a slow come back. That means many of the expanded government facilities currently built will be feeling the lack of real estate development, as evidenced by a 35 percent decline in permitting. If you have any doubts, drive by the parking lot or walk into the Horseshoe Drive permitting complex.

In the private sector, businesses cut back and pare down. Granted, the county is not doing a lot of hiring during these slow times, but the need for more space and expanded facilities should also be placed on the back burner. With reduced revenues as a result of less permitting, consumer taxes and impact fees, it only makes sense.

There were some departments in this year's AUIR that will move forward without requesting more taxes over the next few years and there are some that will indeed need additional revenues in order to provide minimal services. The departments that genuinely need increases in revenue are also the most critical to our safety and welfare; while the departments that are absolutely non-essential and have little to offer in added safety are the ones maneuvering to avoid any cuts.

There are serious shortfalls in jail space and emergency services, while at the same time there are excesses in parks and government buildings. State laws require a certain amount of jail space and more must be built in order to keep our streets safe; at the same time, there will be additional needs for ambulances to care for our aging population. Both of those departments are short on the revenues required to meet their mandatory needs over the next few years.

In contrast, we have millions of dollars being spent above and beyond what is needed in parks and government buildings, both categories that are non-essential and have vacancies and reduced activity in their existing facilities. Yet any attempt to reallocate revenue is hopelessly lost in the smoke and mirrors that accompany any questioning of their programs.

Even more concerning are the items that are not counted by either department to keep space off the books. State parks are not counted as park space in Collier County, even though as we all know places like Wiggins Delnore State Park and Collier Seminole State Park offer abundant services. Likewise, in government buildings, all of the buildings used for Naples City Council, City permitting and similar buildings are not credited and yet the populations in the very same areas are used to “justify” more county space requirements.

The Parks & Recreation Department has also decided to use Conservation Collier as their source for passive recreation facilities as opposed to the traditional passive recreation they should be providing. Instead, they have chosen to concentrate on team sports (after all, the Miami teams have to practice somewhere).

You have to wonder if the voters knew that the added tax voted on during the referendum for Conservation Collier was to supplement county parks and not for additional green space.

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