



*Collier County Commission Chairwoman, Georgia A. Hiller, Esq., CPA, MBA
Collier County Manager, Leo Ochs, Jr.*





Board of Collier County Commissioners

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December 10, 2013

Dear Residents of Collier County, Members of the Board of County Commissioners, and Staff:

I am honored and pleased to present to you Collier County's first State of the County address and to report that Collier County is sound and stable. Our county's finances are strong. Our economy is growing.

We have better defined the role of this government in the context of personal freedom.

We have increased public safety by taking practical steps to remove illicit drugs, reduce theft and help our first responders.

We have made this county more transparent and honest than it has ever been by reforming ethics policies, clarifying legal responsibilities and conforming to state law.

In a number of areas large and small, we have made Collier County a better place to live and conduct business by reviewing county operations and taking decisive action.

Importantly, this has been achieved through a collaboration between the Board of County Commissioners, county staff, our Constitutional Officers, and the public acting as a unified team. The Board, with insight gained through public input, has set policies for the community's benefit that county staff has successfully implemented.

The guiding policy has been to provide the community with the highest level of service at the lowest possible cost to the taxpayers - the essence of fiscal conservatism. This policy has led the county to a level of unsurpassed success.

Our fiscal situation is strong, and likely among the best in the State!

As we emerge from the "great recession," Collier County has not increased property tax rates while maintaining outstanding governmental services for our residents and visitors, notwithstanding a reduction of more than 20 percent in general fund revenues from almost \$400 million in FY 2008 to \$310 million in FY 2013.

In 2013, taxable value countywide increased 3.8 percent representing the second consecutive adjustment since 2007. The increase is welcome news and continues to reverse a trend which saw Collier County lose over \$21 billion in taxable value – almost 27 percent of its tax base – since the 2007 tax year. Based upon State estimates, it is anticipated that Collier County will experience tax base increases through tax year 2017.

The County continued to responsibly pay down its current debt obligation and, with no plans to issue new debt, approximately 50 percent of existing debt will be retired within the next eight years. The county's

debt was at its highest in 2008 - \$804 million. Outstanding debt has been reduced to just under \$600 million in FY 2013 - a decrease of 25 percent. The remaining debt has been refinanced to take advantage of lower interest rates. Annual general governmental debt service has been reduced by 50 percent as a result.

Collier County continues to keep a stable investment quality credit rating from all three major rating agencies. Moody's Investment Service noted that the County's "long term financial position is expected to remain healthy, despite recessionary tax base pressure, given conservative budgeting and fiscal discipline." Fitch Ratings commented on the County's sound financial management by indicating, "The County has responded to considerable revenue deterioration with conservative budgeting, aggressive expenditure reductions and limited use of reserves." The Board of County Commissioners is committed to fiscal conservatism.

Our economy is strong and growing!

In 2013, Collier County was ranked #1 in Florida for job growth. On April 4, 2013, Florida Governor Rick Scott recognized Collier County for having the fastest annual job growth rate in the entire State of Florida.

The Board took proactive and aggressive action to promote economic development and job growth throughout the county:

- Impact fees were again reduced.
- The Land Development Code was amended to streamline building regulations and expedite the review process.
- An automated building plan review and permitting system was installed that allows for faster, more convenient and efficient reviews.
- Standard building permit fees were reduced by five percent.
- The Office of Hearing Examiner was created to expedite reviews of minor zoning and land use applications.
- A partnership with the Chamber of Commerce to promote the county as a business destination was formed.
- The county joined the Southwest Florida Regional Economic Alliance and made a commitment to support and grow regionalism.
- The Board created the Community and Economic Development Chairmanship position - committing to economic development leadership at the Board level.

The Board has reduced government over-reach!

Examples include but are not limited to:

The elimination of Red Light Cameras: There were no demonstrable public safety benefits derived from this initiative, given our sophisticated and well managed engineered traffic signaling system. The contract with the vendor was consequently terminated.

Professional treatment of airport tenants: Fair treatment of all airport tenants is now the norm, not the exception. Companies that provide critical aviation services to Southwest Florida are treated with the respect they deserve.

The Board has increased its commitment to public safety!

The Board of County Commissioners passed the “Collier County Illicit Synthetic Drugs Ordinance” to assist the Sheriff’s Office in its efforts to control the increasing use of illicit synthetic drugs.

The Board of County Commissioners working with the Sheriff’s Office developed a monitoring and disclosure program to make it easier to catch thieves who steal components used in privately-owned and government infrastructure assets.

Emergency Vehicle Pre-emption Devices were approved for phased-in installation. Traffic signals in busy intersections are now preempted so as to assist emergency responders through those intersections.

The Board recognized the need for the build-out of the Sheriff’s special operations center and for a forensics storage lab facility and accordingly began planning for these projects.

As a separate example of working together with the community in crisis, in the wake of the fire that badly damaged the Greater Naples YMCA, the Board worked closely with officials from the YMCA to develop an immediate plan for the continuity of YMCA programs and services. We provided county office space so YMCA staff could continue administrative functions, and we expedited permitting as they rebuilt.

Collier government is honest, open and transparent!

The Board clarified and strengthened the Collier County Ethics Ordinance, making the ordinance consistent with state statutes, making it clear and unequivocal that kickbacks and bribes are illegal in Collier County. The county now can rely on state precedent and advisory opinions for guidance as to what constitutes unethical conduct. The County Attorney is officially designated as the county’s Ethics Officer, available to provide ethics opinions as needed. Additionally, the newly enacted County Attorney’s ordinance will ensure that the County Attorney will represent the county in all legal matters and that Board of Commissioners’ actions conform to the law.

This Board now embraces the critical function of the Clerk of Courts as the independently-elected watchdog over county funds. We are better utilizing county audits in Board decisions, preventing bad actors from receiving grant funds, and tightening purchasing procedures through the passage of a Purchasing Ordinance.

The administration of public records has been consolidated and streamlined so as to promote increased transparency and responsiveness to the public.

Government operations have significantly improved!

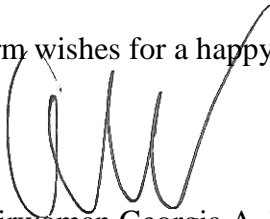
The county has experienced restructuring at all levels, from the Office of the Board of County Commissioners which was redesigned in terms of both management and space, to the restructuring of divisions and the streamlining of advisory boards. Every action has been evaluated from the perspective of its return to the public. Steps that have no return have been eliminated. Examples of operational improvements include: outsourcing of marina operations to securing consultants from residential and commercial real estate and property management firms to assist the county with the purchase, sale, and management of the county’s real estate holdings; viewing job bankers as a means to manage fluctuating service demand levels; and the creation of a Victims Advocacy Coalition - a grant management team and process for victim advocacy organizations in order to increase the amount of grant funding available to further their critical services which taxpayers would otherwise have to pay for.

There are so many additional achievements that are worthy of mention. Dogs are now permitted in county parks, Clam Pass and Wiggins Pass were successfully dredged, the beaches were renourished at a savings of over \$20 million, and a public/private partnership was introduced to bring a new soccer/sports complex as a future project to name a few happy items. These and many other successful 2013 projects are listed in the summary attachment I've prepared for your review.

In short, taxpayer dollars have been protected, conditions for economic growth and prosperity have been created, public safety has been a consistent priority, and our operations have been improved everywhere they could be.

It has been a pleasure being your chair for this past year. I am honored to have played a part in helping to realize our shared dreams, hopes and aspirations for a better Collier County.

Warm wishes for a happy and successful 2014!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'GA Hiller', written in a cursive style.

Chairwoman Georgia A. Hiller, Esq., CPA, MBA