

# *A Message From Your* **Executive Director**



*David  
Murrett*

## **Florida at the Crossroads**

**A**n understatement would be that these are interesting times. Whether on the national, state or local scene, the economy is in turmoil. By now, we all know that the excesses of Wall Street have caused a lot of hardship and turmoil for those of us who live on Main Street. For many, it is a question of just providing the basic needs for our families. For all of us, it is also a question of whether government will have the wherewithal to provide basic services for our families and communities.

A lot of the anger on the national scene is directed at the recklessness and arrogance of major financial institutions. Give them billions and billions of taxpayer dollars to stabilize financial institutions and loosen up credit for all of us peons and what do they do? Go out and buy a forty-five million dollar airplane, give out billions in undeserved bonuses... and still no credit for those of us who want and need to buy cars or homes. This sort of outrageous behavior causes our collective blood to boil. Add to this the big corporations' penchant to outsource much needed work offshore and even set up tax evading, offshore accounts designed to avoid paying their fair share of taxes.

What angers many of us is the question of fairness and equity. Why should most individuals work and pay their taxes, while others try to hide their assets and profits by clever use of tax loopholes and spend government aid improperly?

I know it's hard to believe, but the same sort of thing is happening in Florida. Some well chronicled examples: Some corporations export profit to other states and avoid paying Florida corporate taxes. Can you do that? Some corporations sell valuable real estate and avoid paying documentary stamps on the sale (one corporation reportedly sold

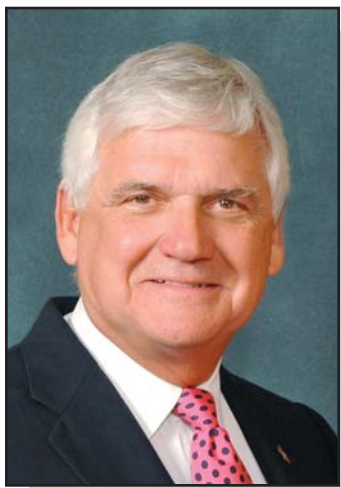
six apartment complexes for \$300 million and avoided paying \$2.1 million in taxes). The funny thing is that if you or I sell a house, we have to pay documentary stamp taxes on it (70 cents for every \$100 of the price). When you buy a coat on the internet, there is no sales tax collected. If you buy the same coat at Penney's, you pay sales tax on it. If you buy a fourteen foot aluminum fishing boat, sales tax has to be paid. Buy a multi-million dollar yacht, and no sales tax is charged. Is this a great country or what?

Coming full circle, you probably wonder where I am going with all of this. First, the average person doesn't like it one bit when he or she plays by the rules, but many in Wall Street and elsewhere feel as though the rules don't apply to them. Second, and my main point, is that when some don't contribute their fair share, it means that the rest of us have to pay more—or needed services cannot be provided because of the resulting shortfall.

The bottom line. Just closing the tax loopholes noted above would do wonders to close the wide budget gap which is causing short-term and, soon to be, long-term damage to Florida and its people. In our own little world, it would greatly help soften the body blows to Florida's law enforcement community. (See **Senator Steve Oelrich's** column below.) Just as the average person is enraged by the antics of Wall Street, there is a building rage here in Florida against the inequities in our tax system which are contributing mightily to Florida's problems. Fix the economy? This will take some doing over time. Fix the inequities in our tax system? Governor and Legislature, this can be done now! I hope our members will convey this message to our elected leadership. ■

*“We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”*

*~ C. S. Lewis*



*Senator  
Steve  
Oelrich*

## *Guest Commentary*

### **The Role Of Law Enforcement**

**A**s you may have heard, last month my colleagues and I in the Florida Legislature completed a Special Session to deal with a \$2.3 billion shortfall in the state budget. Many of the members of the Florida House and Senate, myself included, were not inclined to raise taxes to fill the deficit. We felt there was already too much of a burden on Florida's families with the downturn of our economy. Our only alternative was to cut government spending and we were faced with many unpopular decisions.

We took a thorough look at each state agency's budget and dug deep for as many avenues to reduce spending as we could without hurting citizens. No one likes to see cuts to education, health care, and social services. As the former Sheriff of Alachua County, I firmly believe that without strong law enforcement, other services may suffer even more. During the Special Session, we were able to avoid very deep cuts to law enforcement.

Opportunities did come up where the easy way out would have been to cut funds to many of the law enforcement agencies in the state. One such instance was during a General Government Appropriations Committee meeting, a committee of which I am a member. It was suggested that we, the Florida Legislature, eliminate the vacant law enforcement positions in state agencies like the Fish and Wildlife Commission, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, the Department of Transportation, and the Department of Corrections, to name a few.

After spending nearly thirty years in law enforcement, with fourteen as Sheriff, I knew cuts to these vacant positions would be devastating to our law enforcement agencies. Sure, it is easy to argue that these positions are not being filled so why not eliminate them to save money?

However, these positions are not so easy to get back when our state rebounds from this economic downturn.

As I explained to the committee, it isn't that these positions are vacant because the state agencies refuse to fill them. They are vacant because state law enforcement agencies are losing quality officers to higher paying Sheriff Offices and Police Departments around our state. That being said, local agencies are great places to work, but so are our state law enforcement agencies. In order to keep quality officers in their positions, we need to increase pay to be competitive.

Those positions are vacant for a reason and we are going to need to fill them when the economy rebounds and when state agencies are able to compete with local agencies for officers. We simply cannot afford to cut these positions and have law enforcement, and in turn the citizens of Florida, suffer in the future.

During the Special Session, we were able to avoid many of the deep cuts to law enforcement by simply educating some of our colleagues about the real dangers of reducing spending for public safety. As you know, in law enforcement, we are brothers. We stand together. When issues like this arise in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me and your local Representative and Senator to make sure your voices are heard. Our economy is not out of the woods yet, and cutting law enforcement positions will not cure the budget problems we face.

*Elected in 2006, Senator Steve Oelrich represents Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Gilchrist, Levy, Marion, Putnam, and Union counties in the Florida Senate. He served as Sheriff of Alachua County from 1992-2006. ■*