

A PARTNERSHIP WITH FLORIDA

By STEVEN M. SEIBERT

There are few absolutes in how Americans govern themselves. We tinker with the shape of voting districts. We increase the numbers on county commissions. We change from at-large to single-member districts, and we even form regional governments. Our history is an evolution in the theory and practice of governance, exemplified most clearly by the continuing increases in state budgets and federal authority. However, the cornerstone of American government has been, and always should be, local or community authority. As is often said, "Those closest to the people govern best."

We can talk directly to our local school board members, city and county commissioners, our mayors or even our neighborhood association presidents. We see them at the grocery stores, the t-ball games, and in our places of worship. In most towns, one can also see them in locally televised meetings and follow their decisions in the local newspaper. If true accountability is the hallmark of a representative democracy, then the local officials' proximity to the people makes them more immediately accountable for their decisions.

Of course, the state must maintain its oversight of statewide policies, but I argue for greater local control where it is both appropriate and more effective. The people's will is more evident at the local level where the bond between citizen and government is stronger and the people's understanding of the issues greater. The state should be an engaged partner, not a remote dictator.

Florida law recognizes the breadth of local authority in the notion of "home rule" power—that cities and counties may exercise any reasonable power except as prohibited by law. As the secretary of the state agency that deals

most often with local governments, I respect local authority and the difficult choices local officials must make with limited resources. I see the role of the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) as one of support in helping those communities make more informed choices.

Having set forth the basics of what I believe, let me acknowledge the reality. Many citizens, and certainly many newspaper editorial boards, rail consistently against their local officials, and do so with such vehemence and regularity their charges are often assumed to be true. The claim is that local officials are inept or corrupt or both. It is common for me to be asked by an earnest citizen at a luncheon meeting anywhere in Florida, "How can you argue for greater local control? Do you know what decision the commission made last night? You know, they are all in the pockets of special interests, anyway!"

I remember my own experiences as a county commissioner and find it difficult to fathom the charge that I (or someone a lot like me) and the capable colleagues I served with are either stupid or on the take. Local officials can make bad decisions, but in no greater ratio than the rest of us and certainly no more often than policymakers in Tallahassee or Washington, D.C. In a representative democracy, the simple truth is that the electorate is ultimately responsible. We have met the enemy and it is us.

So we are confronted by conflicting truths: the perception that local officials are incompetent and that Florida's future lies primarily in the thousands of decisions its local officials make. The only logical conclusion is for our local elected and appointed officials to make more informed and, therefore, wiser decisions.

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This fundamental truth was best expressed by Thomas Jefferson:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

This truth applies to many public policy issues, and is the conceptual basis for the devolution of federal and state authority to local government. The wiser exercise of local decision making is also a foundation for growth management reform.

Growth Management

There is no issue more important to Floridians than dealing with the impacts of a growing population. There is also no issue more complex, more frustrating, and more polarizing. Addressing the impacts of Florida's growth is not an option. It is a requirement, and we must do better.

Laws have been enacted since the early 1970s to address population growth. Those in the private and public sectors and those at the state, regional, and local levels have learned much along this long and difficult road. We know, for example, that state oversight of some local government decisions is necessary and appropriate, particularly as those decisions relate to essential state resources. We know that the state must assure that local land use decisions do not adversely affect statewide policies and programs such as the Everglades Restoration program, critical state road capacity, or hurricane evacuation routes.

We also know that layer upon layer of government review is often duplicative and expensive, and accomplishes very little in protecting public interests. Accordingly, DCA staff is spending less time reviewing those local comprehensive plan amendments that merely recognize existing uses, or that promote urban infill, or that represent improvements to existing policies and bring them into line with state law. These examples reflect unnecessary, unfocused bureaucracy and it is irresponsible to continue devoting time to such reviews.

Further, while there are those who would prefer to close our borders and deny others the

benefit of all Florida has to offer, new residents and tourists will continue to come here.

Our debate is not whether or not to allow growth (for it is inevitable), but how best to face its challenges and take advantage of its opportunities. When growth results in a vibrant economy and good jobs, when our children have opportunities to stay and raise their families, when we can embrace the enthusiasm of immigrants, when we are able to protect environmentally precious lands and build critical infrastructure, when the opportunity to own a home is available to even more Floridians—then growth is a positive force.

However, to achieve these goals we must be more responsible, more professional, and more honest in how we address their impacts. We need a new partnership between state government and the communities it serves. We must forge a new partnership in Florida where quality of life decisions are made at the local level. Our communities are built from the bottom up, and the essential role of the state is to protect mutual priorities and support those communities by providing technical assistance in the broadest sense. For example, in many Florida towns and cities, schools are overcrowded, with little hope of catching up and little communication among the school board members and city and county commissioners. Realizing that where people live is often a function of the adequacy and excellence of the available schools, the Bush administration continues to advocate for coordinated planning among those agencies.

Also, DCA is awarding grants, provided by last year's legislature, for technical assistance to local governments. Examples include a community visioning initiative in Monticello, an agricultural land retention study in Sumter County, an educational facilities plan in Polk County, and a master plan for the Old Town area in the town of Oakland.

In many parts of Florida, public infrastructure, including water, sewer, schools, park lands, roads, and drainage, is at best inadequate. Recent state budgets have committed significant dollars to these shortfalls, but it is not enough. Therefore, Gov. Jeb Bush has proposed a true-cost accounting model, a computer-based tool for use by local governments to determine the true costs and benefits of development. The Growth Management Study Commission

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supported this initiative: it will take at least two years to develop and will be cutting edge in the country. Making the short- and long-range impacts of growth evident to local governments and their citizens will lead to wiser decisions and more informed judgments about the use of local revenues.

As part of the Florida Forever program, the Florida Communities Trust grants millions of dollars annually to local governments to acquire land important to the community. These projects include brownfield, public marina, and historical sites, park lands, hiking trails, and properties that regularly flood. Local governments compete for these funds and this year approximately \$100 million will be available in grants.

These are examples of a new paradigm of intergovernmental coordination and partnership. What it reflects is a new direction and focus for the Department of Community Affairs. With this new mission, we are becoming the Department of Community Assistance.

Is this the abdication of state authority and oversight, as some argue? I believe it is not. DCA will continue to aggressively enforce the law, now even more effectively because it is more focused. Most of what the state does well is not the result of being a civic policeman. Most of what it should do is help communities respond to the critical needs of their citizens.

A thousand marvelous community-building ideas are bubbling up from the people of Florida:

- The city of Dunedin is striving to become an elder-friendly community
- A stunning redevelopment has taken place in West Palm Beach
- Osceola County School Board and County Commission jointly hired a planner to coordinate school planning and land use development.

The ideas that make a true difference tend to come from the community, not as mandates from Tallahassee, and DCA's primary task is to foster them, facilitate them, and help make them reality.

Community Life

In his famous text, *Politics*, Aristotle wondered why people live together in communities. He concluded the purpose of the city was to be "a

partnership for living well." Carrying this notion further, author and philosopher Tom Morris wrote,

In business and in life, it means the creative building of new structures, new relationships, and new solutions, new possibilities for our world that are rooted in love, a concern for the dignity and integrity and value of others in this life.

If we can get to the core mission of so many of us involved in charting Florida's future, whether private or public, whether state or local, it is to create partnerships for living well. And although the answers may well be different for Sopchoppy or Sun City than they are for St. Petersburg or Miami, our efforts are better spent collaboratively finding answers to the difficult challenges facing Floridians.

In a recent speech at the Governor's Hurricane Conference, Gov. Bush told 2,000 emergency managers that the most important element of a safer Florida was a more effective growth management system. He talked about economic opportunity for all (a noble goal, by the way) and that it would only be possible when critical infrastructure was put in place when demand was created. As an example, he talked about a single mom taking her child to daycare, then traveling an hour to work and back to pick up the child, and then back home. How many hours would it take? At what cost? How much quality time was wasted? The purpose of growth management, he said, is to build "places of love rather than of frustration."

Our vision has become clouded by the minutiae of the multiple pages of law and rules. We dream of living in communities of dynamic potential and protected resources, not of frustration. There is a common decency among us and a common desire for safe, beautiful, and thriving communities. We spend too many hours wound up in the details and not enough figuring out how to realize the dream. For too long, we have dwelled upon our differences to protect our individual interests. I propose a new paradigm: Let us focus on our common goals and pool our unique abilities so we can solve Florida's most pressing community needs—together.

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