

# County Commission sets priorities for 2010

By **JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER**

PORT CHARLOTTE — Charlotte County commissioners spent all day Friday crafting ideas aimed at improving government efficiency during an annual goalsetting workshop. The group debated the successes of last year's performance-based budgeting, while setting a refined focus moving forward. The commission placed high priorities on public safety, water rates, roads and economic development. And after hours of deliberation, the only thing they could agree on completely is that they have their work cut out for them in 2010.

**The price of protection** One year after cutting \$53 million from the countywide budget, commissioners want to impose their fiscal attitude on the public safety divisions.

The Sheriff's Office and Fire/EMS carry a combined budget of nearly \$100 million. Both organizations endured a handful of reductions last year, but the commission set a goal Friday to explore further cuts this go-around.

"We need to further refine these departments," Commission Chairman Bob Starr said. "We accomplished a lot, but there's still more we can do." Among the improvements inflating the sheriff's budget is a \$16 million expansion to the county jail. The addition was built anticipating an increase in need, yet jail populations have diminished to all-time lows, Starr said.

The wing includes added beds and a section to house juveniles. But with operating expenses rising, the expansion's remained relatively dormant thus far. It costs about \$70 daily to incarcerate an inmate, according to County Administration. With the Sarasota and DeSoto county jails nearing capacity, the commission hopes to explore the possibility of leasing the space to inmates sentenced from other jurisdictions.

The commission also plans to seek reductions to Fire/EMS and the **Charlotte County Health Department**, but with less knowledge about their operating expenses, some commissioners expressed concerns about affecting the area's quality of life. "We have a very safe and healthy community," Commissioner Tricia Duffy said. "Cutting costs is important, but we have to be careful not to micro-manage."

Animal Control's outsourcing expenses also have drawn concerns from the commission.

The Suncoast Humane Society in Englewood opted out of their contract with the county last fall. As a result, all of the strays picked up by Animal Control are now brought to Animal Welfare League in Port Charlotte.

Donations at the shelter are down about 35 percent from last year, so to handle the uptick in animals, the league currently is seeking a new contract with increased boarding fees.

In fiscal year 2008-2009, Charlotte shelled out \$228,739 for shelter expenses. To deflate those figures, Commissioner Robert Skidmore proposed building an inhouse facility.

DeSoto County operates its own animal shelter with one full-time employee, along with volunteers and nonviolent probationers, Skidmore said. He hopes to mirror that model.

**Driving out MSBUs** With construction costs at all-time lows, the commission set a goal Friday to aggressively focus on capital improvements. Some 40 percent of all Charlotte's roads need repaving. But rather than moving ahead with the repairs, the county has been filling potholes at about \$50 a pop.

Now, commissioners want to roll out a widescale repaving plan to bring the county up to standards. The program would carry a \$30 million price tag, according to County Administration.

There's just one problem: the Municipal Services Benefit Units are broke.

"The MSBU system is a trainwreck in progress," Commissioner Adam Cummings said. "Nobody wants to say it out loud, but the whole point of the system is so you can subsidize these projects. There's just not enough money in these neighborhoods to cover the roads."

Cummings also said the current system places too much power with the advisory committees.

The county now will review the possibility of funding road improvements through property taxes, moving away from the neighborhood-by-neighborhood approach.

"There will be winners and losers," Cummings said.

**Water becomes growing concern** Charlotte's water rates likely will be running through the minds of commissioners through the remainder of 2010. With \$154 million in debt, Charlotte County Utilities has one of the highest water rates in the state, a rising concern from area residents, Duffy said. "We have huge problems at CCU," she said. "I'm not pointing fingers, but there's something wrong with the costs and the way things are done." The commission set a goal this year to sink the fees associated with potable water, scheduling a special workshop later this year solely to tackle the issue. Until then, commissioners suggested introducing some certainty into the department by naming a permanent director. Terri Kesner currently is serving as interim director. "If we're going to shake up utilities, we have to get someone in there," Skidmore said. "You can't fully build a team around an interim director."

**'Open for business'** Charlotte County has developed a plan it calls "open for business."

The county wants to increase its economic development efforts by demolishing any roadblocks. Commissioners said that means reducing the timeline associated with building permits, making department staff more customer-friendly and building a "say yes first" attitude.

County Administrator Roger Baltz said it's about developing a mindset, and ultimately a "learning organization." "It has a strong customer component," he said. "We're far from where we want to be, but we're working on it."

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