

Editorial: St. Lucie considering proposal that could have positive impact for region

By TCPalm Staff

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Beyond considering how federal stimulus funds might be used, Treasure Coast governments are investigating steps they can take independently to promote jobs creation and economic development.

Some have talked of tax waivers and impact fee reductions or moratoriums. Led by Commissioner Doug Coward, St. Lucie County is considering declaring an economic emergency.

Coward's proposal, which has garnered national attention, would allow commissioners to tap into emergency reserve funds for use in capital projects. It is doubtful, however, than many funds, if any, would be taken from that \$17.6 million account.

Rather, Coward said, the emergency declaration would allow the county to bypass the regular bidding process to get projects underway quickly, and would allow the county to give preference to local bidders.

"This is one of the toughest experiences I've ever had," Coward said. "People are begging for the opportunity to work. All of us need to try to do everything we can to help."

St. Lucie County's staff is compiling a list of potential capital projects that can be started soon — some in partnership with cities — and that will provide the most jobs for the businesses and industries suffering the worst from high unemployment. Those include trades and transportation; construction; banking, retail and real estate; leisure and hospitality; and manufacturing.

The county funds to be used are either already budgeted or otherwise available, such as from impact fees, and loans previously bonded but not spent.

Giving preference to local bidders has been perhaps the stickiest part of the proposal. Giving

preference to St. Lucie County bidders, for example, could cause retaliation against such bidders in other counties.

Coward has discussed job creation issues with individual commissioners in Martin and Indian River counties.

"In reaching out, we could increase some of our resources and have a regional bidding and hiring process," Coward said. "We would like to work with the region."

The potential problem, he said, is that St. Lucie County commissioners are anxious to move forward, but the other counties may not be as prepared to commit to a joint plan. As an alternative, he said, St. Lucie may decide to give preference to bidders who may create the most St. Lucie jobs, regardless of where those businesses may be located.

If that occurs, it should be temporary. Martin and Indian River counties should come on board quickly to work on a regional bidding and hiring plan. With so many residents crossing county lines to work now, each county could benefit by having more of its residents leave unemployment lines and return to earning salaries.

Coward concedes that what he calls a "local economic stimulus package" will likely be relatively minor because of the limited dollars available. But, he said, he senses a moral obligation to do whatever can be accomplished at the local level.

"The idea of moving forward is about job creation," he said.

That should be a paramount goal for the entire Treasure Coast.



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