

Guest commentary: Pirates overtake Tallahassee with the stroke of a pen

By JOHN BARLOW / Naples

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Not all of the world's pirates are in Somalia. Our current Florida legislators are holding us for ransom.

Here is how the shakedown unfolds.

Ultimately, the state legislators want control of our county's basic destiny. They continue to maneuver control away from local elected officials to the centralist-oriented decision makers in Tallahassee.

Last year, it was grandiose talk about reducing ad valorem property taxes statewide. Never mind that Florida property taxes were by no means excessive. According to the Tax Foundation, Florida ranked 31st out of 50 in the state property tax index ratings. MSN Money ranked Florida 22nd, comparing property taxes to home values, and 28th when compared with income levels.

The state took the first step to squeeze the breath out of counties by proposing Amendment One. The passage of that amendment took a considerable chunk out of local government revenues. The mandatory state-imposed reduction in county revenues was quickly followed by a recession of grand scale.

While one can hardly blame the Legislature for not predicting the gloomy economic situation that was forthcoming, we can and should blame them for commandeering major funds from county coffers.

Tallahassee's latest foible is to bootleg both impact fees and concurrency requirements. In essence, the two proposed bills transfer county growth-management plans to state control. Masquerading as a Community Renewal Act, Senate Bill 360 relieves developers of paying for road improvements, shifting the burden onto current citizens. Property owners who previously paid their fair share

will finance transportation improvements needed for new development.

Growth management will soon be dictated from Tallahassee if SB 360 and House Bill 7127 pass. While these bills focus on the eight largest Florida counties, they create a crack in the dam, eventually bringing more and more state authority to all counties.

In addition to the eight counties, 190 cities across the state will be exempted from transportation concurrency. Collier County can bank on being added to the list in a few short years.

Unfunded mandates — those state-imposed expenditures that are required to supersede all other budget items — accompany these two bills. While eliminating transportation concurrency, the state simultaneously mandates that counties find transportation funding or face sanctions from the state.

SB 630 places a three-year moratorium on the imposition or collection of all impact fees, while HB 1451 permits counties to lease and toll county roads. The state forbids impact-fee revenue and in the same breath encourages amassing revenue by charging a fee to use county roads. Avast with such double-talk!

The state excels at turning county strongboxes into caskets. Yet, the Senate and the House are happy to impose between \$600 million and \$870 million in fee increases for Floridians to balance their proposed \$65 billion fiscal year 2010 budget. A look through the monocle at some of the booty about to be absconded by the looters in state office:

- n An additional \$475 million in revenue by hiking vehicle registration fees.
- n Up to \$67.7 million increased revenue by doubling the charge for car titles.
- n Stockpile \$98 million by doubling first-time vehicle registration fees.
- n \$72.6 million into the treasure chest with increased filing fees for a divorce.
- n Boosting probate fees will bring in \$63.5 million.

The most egregious thrashing of all from these robber barons is the proposal to increase foreclosure filing fees from \$295 to \$1,000 for homes valued at less than \$250,000 and jump from \$295 to \$2,000 for homes valued at more than \$250,000 — an estimated revenue increase to the state of \$72.6 million.

Our state legislators need to get a dose of reality. Floridians are suffering from the economic slowdown. Construction, one of our main industries, has hit bottom. Businesses and trades people are working hard to survive. Retirees have no time to rebuild their nest eggs. Students are hesitant about their career prospects. Anxieties are high within every demographic. The level of concern and angst among the populace is palpable.

Balancing the bloated state budget on the backs of citizens is not good management. Usurping power from local county governments is not good leadership. The state is robbing us of more than our money. They are depriving us of responsive representation and cheating us out of our right to have a voice in shaping our destiny.

It's a truly heartless pirate who makes you walk the plank barefoot and without a blindfold.

John Barlow is a retired executive who now leads an affordable housing effort in Collier County.

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