

I've been hearing from Orlando's residents, many of whom I represent—everyone from a senior citizen living on a fixed income to the manager of millions of square feet of downtown commercial real estate—and they are concerned, as I know you are, about the financial challenges facing the City of Orlando and its citizens.

Please allow me a few words to outline the path ahead of us. During our City Council Budget Workshop on July 14 and 15, Mayor Dyer outlined the parameters of our 2008-2009 Budget Process. It is unfortunate that our news media has continued to portray these steps as the end rather than the beginning of this very open and public process. For example, the City is required by law to first publish a PROPOSED maximum property tax rate well before we introduce the details of the next fiscal year's budget. Once this rate has been recommended, the City Council then begins detailed evaluations of the Mayor's PROPOSED Budget for 2008-2009, in advance of our public hearings taking place on September 8 and 15.

This is not a new process, yet our media jumped the gun for the sake of a story and has led the public to believe that the City has already approved a substantial increase in City property taxes without public input and involvement. In fact, the Orlando Sentinel even tries to make the point that the City has rarely changed the tax rate once it has been proposed in July... however, it has been many years since the City has been faced with the difficult decision of having to choose between raising the millage rate or incurring deep cuts in services. I don't believe that any media can project what the next few months will bring since we are in uncharted waters.

Let me be clear—the TRIM notice is not a tax bill and only makes citizens aware of each taxing district's proposed millage rate for the next tax year as well as the dates for any budget hearings for each of those entities. For a City resident, your tax notice includes the proposed millage rates as well as the amount of subsequent taxes that would be levied by the School Board, Orange County, Orange County Library System, the St. John's River Water Management District and the City of Orlando. I urge you to study this notice carefully so that you can then share your comments with each of your elected officials before final votes are taken and tax bills are mailed.

At the City's hearings, public input is the main component. It isn't until after the second and final hearing that we formally adopt a millage rate. Between now and the first budget hearing, I will personally seek the advice of District 3 constituents so that I can make a fair decision based on what is in the best interest of all citizens in our Great City. Just to recap, the public hearings will take place in the evenings of September 8 and 15 at Orlando City Hall. Please mark your calendars now so that you can attend these important meetings and share your opinion with our Mayor, the City Council and me.

I don't need to tell you that we are facing a riptide of converging economic forces that some believe threaten to pull us under financially. Along with these fears is the strong feeling that all levels of government run well beyond their means and that elected officials become part of the problem after they are elected. From my short time as your Commissioner, I have not found that to be the case in the City of Orlando. However, the perceptions are genuine and must be addressed as we move toward a balanced budget. And while there is uncertainty all around us, we need to tread carefully and calmly in order to make sound economic decisions—decisions that we as elected officials must remember will have a lasting impact.

And while many of the factors that have led us to this point were and are out of the City's control, I have certainly learned that all politics are local. So in this time of challenge, we as the City of Orlando must seek creative solutions to make sure that Orlando and its residents can keep their heads above water as we ride out this financial downturn. By not panicking and taking the time to study all of the available approaches, we have a better chance of not doing anything that would have drastic, long-term effects for our citizens. Many have said that we should just make across-the-board cuts. While doing so may make the numbers balance, the outcomes may actually prove to draw us further down economically, advancing

job loss and decreasing property values thus perpetuating the cycle. Many others have said that we need to focus on our core city services. Besides police and fire protection, that definition is extremely broad and subjective. To the young family, parks might be considered a core service; to the senior citizen, public transportation and senior community centers may be a priority; to a small business, timely permitting services and operating incentives may be their main concern.

These are just some of the comprehensive issues with which we are struggling. And comprehensive problems deserve comprehensive solutions.

I was born in Orlando. I have lived within the City limits my entire life and will continue to do so until I am laid to rest next to my mother and father in Greenwood Cemetery. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, a wife, a son and a daughter who live and work in this community. Anyone who believes that I would arbitrarily make these painful decisions out of arrogance or lack of concern for my fellow citizens, or that I would cry wolf about our financial dilemma, does not know what's in my head or my heart.

As your representative, I am going to do what I have done since I was elected... I will do the best I can to consider all those I represent, to not just listen to those who yell loudest, and to remember that leadership is a privilege that comes at the price of having to make the difficult decisions, decisions that I do not take lightly. If you have any ideas, I am listening.

Your fellow Orlandoan,
Robert Stuart