

## **Solid Ground for the Future**

**By Gordon Burger, Director of Budget and Administrative Services**

As a relatively new resident let me first say I thoroughly enjoy living and working in Charlotte County. Oct. 1 marks my one year anniversary with the County as well as my first budget. The support, collaboration and input from the organization, the Board of Commissioners, Administration, elected officials, community partners and citizens has been great.

On Sept. 29, 2010 the Board of Commissioners formally adopted the 2010/11 Budget. The total budget of \$749 million is \$40 million less than last year, necessitated primarily by a 13.9 percent reduction in property valuations, the County's primary source of revenue. Although this has been an intense budget process I believe it accomplished the Board's directive to maintain current levels of service and has positioned Charlotte County for long-term fiscal stability.

The past few years have been tumultuous for local governments everywhere. With the economic downturn came both declining revenues and increasing needs. Local governments were caught in the middle and many relied on reserves or short-term fixes to keep their budgets in balance. That strategy will help weather a short-term economic downturn but not the long-term economic restructuring our nation is facing. Charlotte County had the foresight to balance some of those short-term strategies with real structural changes. In the past four years the County-wide budget has been trimmed by \$400 million and staffing has been reduced by 400 positions. In fact, salaries and fringe benefits comprise only 11 percent of the total budget, as many services have been trimmed or contracted out. While other governments were spending down their reserves, Charlotte County was building theirs.

Those past actions coupled with restructuring the way we fund the Sheriff's operations have put us on solid ground for the future. For the 2010/11 Budget, a portion of the millage has been rolled-back to maintain the same level of funding for the Sheriff's operations as 2009/10. Starting in 2011/12, the plan is to move all of the Sheriff's operations into a Municipal Service Taxing Unit (MSTU) that would have its own separate millage and the BCC millage rate would be correspondingly reduced. From that point forward there will be a clear distinction between tax dollars that go to funding the Sheriff's operations and tax dollars that fund the remaining governmental functions.

That doesn't mean the future is rosy. For our five-year projected budget we are anticipating a continued decline and then flattening of revenues, but not of the magnitude we have seen in the past. The strategy to deal with reduced or flat funding while maintain current service levels is threefold: 1) Fund the Sheriff's operations through the MSTU as described above; 2) Use approximately \$2.7 million of Fiscal Stabilization Reserves annually; and 3) Reduce spending by 3 percent annually.

Reducing expenditures by 3 percent each year without impacting service levels will not be easy, but it is doable. It means continuing to review each position that comes open to see if we can restructure and not fill it. It means continuing to systematically review our processes to find more efficient ways of doing them. We also have a number of technical solutions we will be implementing to streamline and reduce costs. It will not be easy, but this is why I entered public service—to make a difference. The leadership and employees of Charlotte County take the stewardship of taxpayer's dollars very seriously. I have been tremendously impressed with the caliber of people who work for the County—they are a big part of why this is a great place to live.