

Two-year budget aids in transparency, accountability

By Gordon Burger, Budget Director

On September 27, 2012 the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners (BCC) adopted the county's budget for fiscal year 2012/13 and also approved an Ad Valorem millage rate of 6.2796, the same as the approved rate last year. This is a significant moment in our county history; 2012/13 is the second year of the county's first two year budget. Two-year budget cycles are becoming common at the local government level. A two year budget allows us to think more of the longer term, anticipate how actions in the first year impact later years, and provides more fiscal stability. In doing so, we avoid short term decisions with long term consequences.

A two year budget also has the advantage of taking less time to prepare the second year, allowing staff to concentrate on county services. The budget is typically adopted at the end of September; just three months later in January we used to start the process all over again. By forcing ourselves to think longer term and more strategically on the front end of the budget process, we have eliminated much of that work in the second year. The budget process is intense; through it priorities are established and spending is aligned with those priorities. Multiple people in every department in the County are involved in the process. A two-year budget is even more beneficial considering that County staffing levels have decreased by approximately 40% over the last few years (from 1,409 positions to 1,004).

We used this second year to do something we have not had the time to do thoroughly in the past, and that is evaluation. We approached this evaluation from two different angles. First, we looked at the effectiveness of past efforts. Since 2008, Charlotte County has made over \$92 million of budget reductions through various initiatives, reorganizations and efficiency efforts—over 100 different efforts. A number of these were selected for in-depth analysis to see what the impact has been. For example, in an effort to control health benefit costs the county established a Health Center for our employees and their families. The medical services at the Health Center are provided by a third party vendor and by shifting costs from network providers to the Health Center the county has save over \$4 million since opening in April of 2009. This savings, along with other examples were discussed at a Board workshop on May 24, 2012 and all of the materials can be viewed online at CharlotteCountyFL.gov in the agenda archive.

Another result of the evaluation is the development and publishing of our community scorecard. The county establishes priorities, develops programs and funds services, but how effective are they? We had lots of data to demonstrate one way or the other but no method to bring it all together in a comprehensive way. That is the purpose of the community scorecard. The scorecard is a tool that the Board, the organization and citizens can view to quickly see how effective we are and how we are measuring that effectiveness. There are measures for each of the Board's Focus Areas: water resources, public safety, economic development, efficient and effective government, growth management, quality of life, human services and fiscal planning. The community scorecard can be found in the "Transparency" pages of the county website, CharlotteCountyFL.gov. The idea is that anyone at any given time can click one of the scorecard categories such as "Efficient & Effective Government" and see how we are doing based on such measures as customer satisfaction, number of employees per 1000 citizens, comparisons with other counties and individual service measures. As citizens you can now easily see not only how your tax dollars are being spent but what is being accomplished.

As employees of Charlotte County we take pride in the work we do and the services we provide. Now we have the time and tools to demonstrate that commitment to the community. The move to a two year budget has been a big step forward in maintaining fiscal stability and focusing on customer service, and it has provided more opportunities to make the organization more transparent and accountable.