

Charlotte County update for 11/2/16

County welcomes input, scrutiny on budget

By Gordon Burger, Charlotte County budget director

If one clear conclusion can be drawn from this year's national election it is that many of us don't trust government. Although more pronounced at the national level some of that distrust is also at the local level. I have been involved in governmental budgeting for more than 25 years. During that time I have heard citizens say the budget is just "smoke and mirrors," it is "not transparent," "intentionally confusing" or "created in a vacuum." While myriad accounting regulations and legal requirements can make the process confusing, it is not that different from how you manage your own finances, just with a few more zeros.

For Charlotte County, the budget is a financial plan detailing how we will maintain fiscal stability and manage our capital and debt, just as you have a long-term plan for how to retire, how to pay off your mortgage and send your children to college. Secondly, the budget is an operations guide, detailing how the organization is structured, what are our processes are and how resources will be allocated. In your home, it may not be written but you have the same type of guide: who pays the bills, who goes grocery shopping, who prepares the meals and what are the spending limits.

The budget is a communication device, striving to convey fiscal information in a user-friendly and transparent way. Again, it may not be written, but in your home, if there is not clear communication and understanding about your budget, it will not be successful. We take communicating the budget very seriously and try to make it as intuitive as possible. I invite you to peruse all of the information available on our website, www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov. Simply click the Transparency tab at the top and then click the budget process for FY2016-FY2017 and you will find links to a wide range of information on the budget.

Finally, the budget is a policy document, detailing the county's policies, mission, vision and goals. Those can sound like buzz words, but what it means is the budget lays out why Charlotte County government exists and what we are attempting to accomplish, both in the short and long term. These goals change over time to meet the unique situations we are facing just like they do in your home. You may have a major long-term goal such as going back to school to advance your career options or moving to a different community to ensure your kids are in a good school. It could be shorter term goal of tightening the budget so you can afford that family cruise next year.

The official mission of the budget process is to help decision makers make informed choices about the provision of services and capital assets and to promote stakeholder participation in the process. In other words, we want to make good decisions on how to spend your tax dollars and we want your participation in that process.

Our fiscal year runs from Oct.1 to Sept. 30 and even though our fiscal year 2017 just began we are already working on the process to develop our next two-year budget for fiscal years 2018 and 2019. The process begins with updating our long-range direction and establishing shorter term goals for the next two years. That responsibility lies with your Board of County Commissioners and will be finalized during a series of workshops in January. My job is to ensure commissioners have all the information they need to make good decisions.

That information comes from a variety of sources and stakeholders. We pull together subject matter experts from both within and external to the organization to help define the key issues we

are facing. For instance, one of the board's focus areas is human services, so we bring together staff from the county's Human Services Department (Senior Services, Veteran Services, etc.) but we also bring in representatives from the Department of Health, Charlotte Behavioral Health Center, Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic and the United Way to help tell the story of what our community looks like in terms of human services. What are the needs? What services do we provide? What don't we provide? Who is impacted? What are the key issues we are going to be facing in the next two, five and 10 years?

Another source of information is the county's employees. We conduct a survey asking our employees to assess the organization on areas such as communication, collaboration, training and work environment. These results inform decisions about internal changes that could be made to increase our effectiveness and enhance customer service.

The third and most important stakeholders are the citizens of Charlotte County. This is where you come in. This is your community and ultimately, this is your budget. This month we will be conducting the National Citizen Survey, a standardized survey that makes use of statistically valid methodology, questions and sample sizes. This is a community-wide survey of residents to get their perspectives about the quality of the community and available services as well as residents' priorities for Charlotte County. We conduct this survey every two years, giving the county the ability to compare results across time but also with 500-plus governments across the nation. This is valuable not only in determining what our citizens want but also to see if we have made progress on past goals.

This year we have the opportunity to open this same survey to all residents of Charlotte County. The survey will be available online Nov. 28 through Dec. 9. Simply go to our website, www.CharlotteCountyFL.gov, and click the Community Survey banner. I invite you to participate in this opportunity. This is your community and, ultimately, this is your budget.

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