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## Shut off the money spigots - 1/23/2009

### Shut off the money spigots

A group of libertarians took over a wasteful government agency and dismantled it, returning money to property owners in Lee County. It's a lesson in how citizens can target government waste.

#### GOVERNMENT WATCH

by Jean Gruss | Editor/Lee-Collier

When he ran his auto-parts business in Fort Myers, Jack Tanner remembers local government purchasers visiting his store every summer with a long list.

"We have money to spend," they would tell him. "How much can you give us?"

Government agencies often had money left over at the end of the budget cycle in July and bureaucrats feared their budgets would be cut in the future if they didn't spend it all. Tanner, 74, now retired, says he didn't turn away the business, but the experience was disturbing. "I certainly didn't encourage it," he says.

That formative experience led Tanner to target government waste as his mission in retirement. Over the last two years, he and two libertarian colleagues were elected to the Lee Soil and Water Conservation District board and together they dismantled the agency, refunding all the money to property owners in Lee County.

The exercise is a good lesson in how to cut needless government programs. While municipal and state legislators bemoan the cuts they have to make in this economic downturn, they might learn a thing or two from people like Tanner.

It wasn't easy. Despite the fact that the district had a very small budget, no taxing authority and no regulatory functions, Tanner says he ran into significant roadblocks from bureaucrats.

But Tanner isn't finished. He's encouraging other citizens to use his roadmap for eliminating government waste. Shrinking revenues will be like the wind at his back, he says.

### Sprinkling money away

After he sold his business in 1995, Tanner began to meet with other libertarians around the state, eventually rising to chairman of the Florida party.

Through others, he learned that soil and water conservation districts had been established in every county in Florida long ago and were ripe for reform. These districts were created to be conduits for federal and state

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funds to farmers, but their missions had mutated over the years. The Lee Soil and Water Conservation District was formed in 1947.

When he looked into the district in Lee County, Tanner discovered that the agency was operating a mobile-irrigation lab that paid a full-time technician \$50,000 a year to inspect sprinkler systems at homeowners' request. The district promoted the free service in utility bills and the contract with the state provided they do 120 evaluations a year. "Are you getting the picture here? This is a nice job. They were doing 30 per quarter. That's not even one every other day."

What's more, Tanner learned that private companies could do the same thing for \$30 to \$100, depending on the size of the system. One contractor told him he was doing 1,000 inspections a month. "Once I found that out, I realized we don't need this at all," Tanner says.

In early 2004, before he was elected to the board, Tanner asked the district for public records such as the minutes of meetings and financial statements. "I met with big-time resistance," Tanner says, recalling how a county employee physically barred him from viewing any documents by standing in the doorway of the district office.

Tanner says it was a simple request. "I wasn't known in town as a trouble maker," he says.

Tanner's parents moved to Fort Myers from Tampa when he was three years old and he operated an auto-parts business until he closed it in 1995. Meanwhile, there was a vacancy on the board and Tanner got on the ballot. He won by a margin of 100,000 votes in November 2004, though he had successfully lobbied to be appointed to fill the vacancy earlier in June. "Now I'm inside and I can see everything," he says, smiling.

#### On the inside

Once on the board, Tanner asked his fellow board members to amend the contract to boost the number of inspections the technician did, but he was met with snickers. "I basically got laughed at," he recalls. "Why would we want to do more than we get paid for?" members asked him. Instead, they voted to accept money from the water management district for a second sprinkler technician.

Tanner also discovered that the county provided a part-time office manager and a secretary to handle requests and calls. One day, in 2005, he was reading the agenda of an upcoming Lee County Commission meeting, and there was a request from the county to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for \$75,000 to pay the soil and water conservation district office manager even though he spent only 10% of his time at the office. He spent the rest of the time doing county work, but on the federal dime. "We were being used," Tanner realized. "I caught [county commissioners] with their hand in the cookie jar."

By then, Tanner decided that the only way to change the program was to help libertarian colleagues get elected, which happened in 2006. Tanner was named chairman and newly elected libertarians Tom Clark and Kim Hawk joined him on the board.

In the time that Tanner had joined the board, the district's annual budget had ballooned to \$200,000 with a third technician who was about to be hired. But by early 2007, the majority board of libertarians decided to cancel all the contracts, fire the technicians and return \$100,000 that had built up in reserve to Lee County property owners.

At the district meeting called to vote on canceling the sprinkler service, nearly 20 people showed up. Most of them were county and municipal honchos who urged them to retain the wasteful program.

Besides eliminating the program and firing the two technicians, the board

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sent a letter to the Lee County Commission to stop requesting federal grants in the name of the district. "With that, business was over," Tanner says. "We took care of it with one meeting."

#### Giving the money back

While the district had essentially put itself out of business, Tanner says it faced the challenge of how to return \$100,000 in reserves back to taxpayers. Surprisingly, that proved to be more difficult than they initially thought.

At first, Tanner suggested the tax collector divide the money and dole it out to every property owner, but that amounted to 5 cents each. And anyhow, the tax collector told Tanner he didn't have the authority to give money back.

Then, the district approached the Lee County Mosquito Control District and offered them the money in exchange for reducing their budget by the same amount. The mosquito control board agreed to take the money but refused to cut the budget by \$100,000.

So Tanner decided the district would mail a \$10 check to any property owner who requested one, though he doubted that as many as 10,000 would ask. To his surprise, the district received 15,000 applications within a month. The majority of those requests came over the Internet, but as many as 1,000 people wrote in to request their checks.

Not wanting to waste taxpayer money, Tanner himself has taken on the laborious task of entering names and addresses on a first-come, first-served basis into a QuickBooks database and forwarding that information to Fifth Third Bank, which then mails out the checks. Each name and address has to be double-checked with the Lee County Property Appraiser's database. "We've sent out over \$8,000," Tanner says.

The task has been made more difficult by the fact that about 10% of the checks he's mailed out so far haven't been cashed. He's learned that some people have framed them.

#### To dissolve or not to dissolve?

Tanner and his libertarian colleagues on the district board have discussed whether or not to dissolve the Lee Soil and Water Conservation District. But Tanner says he's reluctant to do that.

First of all, there's the risk that someone could create the district anew. All that's needed to start a soil and water conservation district is a petition signed by 25 people and it can be added to the ballot at the next election. Then, it's really hard to dissolve the agency. It requires either a majority of Lee County citizens to sign a petition or the signature of the Florida Secretary of Agriculture. Tanner says he knows of only one instance that happened, where the secretary signed off on the dissolution of the district in urban Pinellas County.

Even though it performs no function, Tanner says the district will continue to exist in its dormant state. "We want the legislature to change the law," Tanner says.

#### Targeting other agencies

Tanner, a frequent blogger on local media Web sites about excessive government spending, says he's set his sights on other municipal agencies that have bloated budgets. He says the fire districts in Lee County are ripe for change, for example.

Tanner is also helping other libertarians run for office, though it's not an easy task. "Up in Tampa I helped them, but they didn't get elected," he says.

He encouraged three libertarians to run for the Collier Soil and Water Conservation District, but one backed out and the other two never attend the district's board meetings. Interestingly, after the Lee district ceased performing sprinkler checks, the water management district gave the contract to the Collier district until it ended in October because of funding shortfalls.

Despite his best efforts, Tanner says the economic downturn will do more to reduce wasteful spending by state and local governments. Still, he won't slow his efforts. "I have the roadmap as to how to do that," he says.

#### REVIEW SUMMARY

Agency. Lee Soil and Water Conservation District

Politician. Jack Tanner

Key. Creating a new government agency is easy, but dismantling it is difficult.

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