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## **Special District Budget or Sneaky Budget – Which Do You Want?**

By

Stan Bainter

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*Stan Bainter is a former member of the state House of Representatives for Districts 25 and 27 and active citizen and Florida TaxWatch member.*

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It is budget time all over Florida. The Legislature has made it possible for the property taxes of Florida citizens to be lowered and local governments are finding ways to circumvent the law. Many are simply going to raise fees. At least they are honest, and are telling us what they are doing. In South Florida, Boca Raton and Delray Beach sued Palm Beach County for imposing substantial taxes on real estate within cities to fund county services. They won the case.

Lake County was the fourth highest county in the state in percent increases of total taxes levied between 2001 and 2006, at 161 percent. I mention this because I feel this is just the beginning of the next tax revolt in the U.S. and the state.

The legislature created special districts for a special purpose. Most are funded by fees or ad valorem millage. You would think they would plan a budget of expenses and set the millage to fit. No, that is not the way it is being done.

The special district I am the most familiar with is loading the budget with items they have no intention of purchasing, or are inflating the costs. The taxpayers have paid for these same items three and four years in a row. Each year I have seen excesses in the budget, and until now the interest amounts to \$1 million on accumulated excess funds. This special district has lowered the millage in the past years, but due to recent growth, they continue to receive the same amount of money. Private businesses are limited in the amount of surplus they can carry over -- not true with government.

The lack of serious oversight on these districts is something I would like to see changed. Only through performance audits would we see the changes that we need to make. The boards do not take the voters and taxpayers seriously, as they are usually either appointed or so nondescript that the public is hardly aware of them.

Many will feel they have to be auditors to be able to find questionable budget and spending practices in government agencies. Not so! But you have to be concerned enough to stop thinking everything is OK just because someone makes a fancy presentation. The devil is in the details. You start by requesting budgets for the past four years and comparing them. Then you ask for the expenses for the past four years and compare them with the budgets. Then you ask questions, lots of questions. As you go along you will be amazed at how many more questions you have. What you learn will be rewarding. Of course the more people you get involved, the more you will get accomplished

The quickest way to correct these inequities is for the legislature to require all special districts to undergo annual performance audits as well as financial audits. Even though the legislature is the oversight committee on most special districts, don't hold your breath for any changes. It may not be politically correct.

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