

Ideas in Action

Florida
TaxWatch
Inc.

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THE VISION THING: FLORIDA'S SALVATION

By: Dr. Roger S. Kaufman, Professor and Director of the Center for Needs Assessment and Planning at Florida State University

Imagine yourself having an out-of-body experience. You are watching a team of physicians operating on you. One surgeon is opening your mid-section to remove your spleen while another repairs a deviated septum. The third is administering the most lawsuit-resistive anaesthetic available. Another is giving you electroconvulsive shock (for your mental health) and still a fifth is putting in an artificial knee.

Each specialist is working away on you; each with a separate agenda. You watch the monitor and your vital signs are failing even while the best intentioned experts are each doing what he or she know how to do. No one is looking after all of you . . . just parts and pieces. You are powerless to respond, cannot yell "take care of all of me! Make me healthy again!" You are powerless to stop the single-objective onslaughts of different practitioners. You see the life drain out of you.

Now, imagine having an out-of-body experience observing Florida and its power brokers--legislators, lobbyists, executives, business people and special interest groups--operating on you. And Florida. One is operating on your education system, insisting that each learner be instructed to write many hours per week, but don't require any resulting skill. They just spend time writing regulations and rules while transferring accountability to you.

Another power broker is reorganizing (again) your health system and splitting off the elderly into a separate agency--as if different health and social systems are required once you passed a magical age. Another is telling you where you can't build docks while approving others which will deliver complete and final pollution. Another tells you where you must build high rises even though the infrastructure won't support them. Another cuts your exemptions while another taxes your services. Over there is someone selling you lottery tickets while another person takes the money away to pay for things never intended. They are all there, operating on you (and Florida), each with his or her own well-intentioned single issue. You see the vital signs flickering and declining. You see the life drain out of you. And Florida. Nobody is looking after all of Florida.

Far fetched? Not on your life. Or Florida's. All Florida legislators, lobbyists, executives and special interest group heads have their own agenda. They pursue their issue as if it is the only one which matters. They feed PACs and twist arms. They plant friendly media reports and slyly deride anyone or anything which will get in their way. They are the **single issue politics** artists.

If we keep it up, Florida surely will die. We are now so splintered that there is no overall vision of what Florida should become and thus no way to decide among competing ideas, legislation and programs. They all are looking after themselves and just about nobody is looking after Florida.

Most of our solutions don't go with our real problems. We react to every problem or crisis with new laws and more programs. All these solutions are like putting Band-Aids on brain tumors. We throw our money, time and energy at single-issue fixes and wonder why they and the whole system doesn't work. When we focus on single issues without looking at the whole, it is like hiring different companies to build a missile: one does the fuel tanks, another the electronics, another the guidance and one more the hydraulics . . . and nobody has determined if the beast is to go to Mars or around the block. We work on single fragments of the whole and we've never bothered to define the destination.

Our frustration grows as we spend more to fix real and imagined ills. We confuse ends and means and rush from one solution to the next with the profound hope that something, anything, will make things better. No luck. How come things don't seem to work? The world has changed, Florida has changed, yet we still use outdated paradigms and models to guide us. We continue to steer toward tomorrow through a rear view mirror.

We really don't know where we are headed---no vision---so how can we sensibly select how to get there? We talk about how-to's (more jails, state income tax, right-sizing, one stop permitting, educational vouchers, privatization, more social workers, increased jobless aid) and don't focus on payoffs. We focus on quick fixes and solutions and don't speak to the results and solutions that must be delivered such as no crime, smart graduates, good health, everyone with a good job.

We lack real visions to guide us. Sure, we have a state comprehensive plan which was a good start when created. But it is out of date, incomplete and a jumbled mixture of solutions and destinations. The consequences of having solutions-in-search of problems are expensive, destructive, divisive, frustrating and irresponsible. We split ourselves from our community partners as we look after ourselves and let others look after themselves. We fight over the scraps and wonder why our cities are full of hate, suspicion, poverty and violence. We may continue to legislate change and attempt to micro-manage ourselves, or we can define and achieve the kind of Florida we want for tomorrow's child.

Some people are catching on. The September issue of FLORIDA TREND started pointing out the nakedness of the emperor. We have problems and they can be fixed. But Florida only can be returned to health if we define what kind of Florida we want for our grandchildren and work continuously to get there. We don't know where to head, so we can't decide how to get there. And we keep trying one popular quick fix after another.

We can and must change this single-issue, reactive approach to Florida. We must. And it doesn't take more money to pull it off. All we have to do is create a shared vision: a results-based description of what kind of world we want for tomorrow's child. Then, we must work together to get there with each person making her and his unique contribution. Sure, we won't get there this year, or next . . . nor likely within our childrens' lifetime. But we can identify a common North Star toward which we all can contribute and steer. Every year we should plot our progress and commit, by deeds not just words, to our continuous improvement as we together move to the ideal vision. Here is a starter:

There will be no crimes, murders, rapes, or substance abuse. Every child will be a wanted child, brought into the world with the intention and capability to love, shelter, feed, clothe and educate each and every one. We will be at peace and free of infectious disease. Poverty will not exist and every woman and man will earn at least as much as it costs them to live unless they are going to school and moving toward preparing themselves to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. The unlucky and unfortunate

among us will be helped to help themselves so that they are, every day, increasingly close to being self-sufficient and self-reliant. People will take charge of their lives and be responsible for what they use, do and contribute. Personal, intimate and loving partnerships will form and sustain themselves. Florida business will earn profits without bringing harm to its clients and our mutual world." Government's primary contribution will be assisting people to be healthy, happy and self-sustaining and will reinforce independence and mutual contribution. Each government agency will be organized and funded to the extent to which it meets its objectives and contributes to the ideal vision.

An ideal vision? "Utopian!" "Impractical." Sorry, none of the above. It really is practical dreaming. Martin Luther King Jr. provided a dream--an ideal vision. Some of course laughed, but many others simply and quietly went to work to achieve it. And we are showing continuous but bumpy improvement toward his dream . . . not fast enough or smoothly enough, but as we move toward it we all win and benefit. His dream was not Utopian; it is sensible and practical.

But dreams are almost always uncomfortable for those who get short term payoffs from the status quo. Regardless of who isn't appeased, change is a constant reality . . . we can only decide to be the masters or victims of it. How to be the masters of change? Prepare our own ideal vision and hold everyone accountable for moving toward it. Here are some first steps Floridians can take:

1. Convene a no-nonsense group of real leaders (not just those who have trivial characteristics) who will refine the ideal vision and put some measurements with it.
2. Define how close we will come to it by the years 2010 and 2000.
3. Rewrite the State Comprehensive Plan and lobby intensely for its passage. This must be a non-partisan effort and must overtly neutralize the single-issue quick-fix artists.
4. Once passed, each government agency will develop an Agency Management Plan which identifies which of the Comprehensive Plan objectives it commits to deliver each year from the next through year 2010. It also will provide both the measurable specifications for accountability purposes as well as the budget proposal to get the job done. (HRS has a first step in doing this with its last Agency Functional Plan/Strategic Plan.) Each agency will prepare its own Agency Functional Plan, for its own internal management and will use it as it does its work.
5. Once per year, the Governor will provide a public report card to citizens which shows progress and shortfalls for each agency for each objective. The Governor will also report on the total health of Florida based on the vital signs.
6. The governor will recommend to the Legislature which programs, projects, activities and functions should be (a) terminated (b) modified and (c) continued.
7. Every politician would be held accountable for showing (a) how her/his bill would measurably contribute to the ideal vision and report on that progress to constituents. Local politicians should do likewise.
8. The Comprehensive Plan will be reviewed once every two years for required revisions.

Using an ideal vision to guide us as we continuously improve Florida is easier than it first appears. This approach has revolutionized organizations worldwide and it can create a caring revolution for Florida. Our leaders can help us be continuously better than we are now. We can improve ourselves, our cities and our state. Almost all of us will begin the journey as soon as we have direction and shared commitment to our destination. Our future depends upon being proactive as we move toward an ideal vision. As JFK asked, if not us, who? If not now, when?

About the Author

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ABOUT FLORIDA TAXWATCH

Florida TaxWatch is the only statewide organization entirely devoted to state taxing and spending issues in Florida. Since its inception in 1979, Florida TaxWatch has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens' hard earned tax dollars.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute supported entirely by voluntary, tax-deductible membership contributions and philanthropic foundation grants. Membership is open to any organization or individual interested in supporting a credible research effort that promotes positive change. Florida TaxWatch members, through their loyal support, help Florida TaxWatch to bring about an effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves.



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