

Alison Law: Behind Paula's rant, serious questions about taxes

*By Alison Law
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Airport scanners and personal tax bills have a lot in common. We all know what's under the clothing or in the tax bills, but both are offensive when displayed in public.

The County Commission swearing in ceremony is a time for new commissioners to celebrate with their supporters. Their speeches thank friends and family, and lay out their real agenda for the next few years.

This year Paula DeLaney hijacked Susan Baird's day just as Kanye West did for Taylor Swift.

Paula lives for and loves politics, and her rant at the county swearing-in was intentional. It reached an audience that may not normally listen to her and caught people off kilter.

Which may be why attendees didn't hear her real message. If you listened, I promise you will agree with her. She summarized very succinctly with, "Florida needs tax reform."

Paula's demonstration involved property taxes. Her own home reflects twice as much in Save Our Homes deferral than in taxable value. If you purchased your home a while ago, and especially before 1995 when Save Our Homes passed, you pay significantly less than newer neighbors. Is it fair that renters and first-time homeowners, often with their first professional jobs, pay more?

I'd add to her rant the sales tax exemptions, which total \$21 billion annually. The exempt items run five pages and boggles the mind.

Is it good public policy to exempt bottled water at a cost of \$10.2 million? Exemptions should sunset every 10 years, unless renewed by our elected officials. We won't agree on which exemptions to keep, but it is a discussion Florida should have.

Paula's point was that citizens least able to afford taxes carry considerably more than those of us that can. The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy ranks Florida second-most regressive for its entire tax burden. The wealthiest 1 percent in Florida pay 2 percent of their income in combined state taxes. The lowest 20 percent pay over 13 percent of their income to Florida, or 514 percent more than the top 1 percent.

Few of us in Alachua County fall into that 1 percent, so what about us? The middle 60 percent pay 300 percent more of our wealth than that same top 1 percent.

Further, tax changes in the last few decades save our wealthiest residents over \$2 billion per year.

Paula pointed out that taxes are not the only problem in Florida. We have core services we must provide: Jails, roads, and safety. Schools are given lip service as Florida's "paramount" responsibility, yet we fund schools in the bottom few consistently year to year.

So why are we rebelling? I think our government forgot some very core principals:

1. Governmental services and facilities must be fairly distributed, visible to taxpayers, and critical to our well-being and future. Anything else must go.
2. If money spent now will create significant savings later, as in jails or major road repairs, then it becomes a critical expenditure.
3. Taxes and benefits must be fairly distributed to each resident, not taxing or serving one population to the exclusion of all else.
4. Government must be forward-thinking, creating an environment people want to live in, contribute to, and visit.

However inappropriate, Paula brought an important topic to the table. Florida tax and spending reform is long past due. Paula and the Tea Party will probably disagree on what and how, but that's why we are a democracy. We'll work it out.

We forget sometimes that we are neighbors working for the same things: a better life for our family, friends and children.

The swearing-in was worth watching, whether to support Susan Baird, or to listen to Paula's tirade. Susan, the lone Republican, will express a few opposing views over the next few years. Paula signaled that she's willing to work on some basic issues, in a way that made us all pay attention. I expect we'll see a few more missteps this year.

Local government hasn't been this much fun to watch in years. Paula, thank you for catching our attention.

Alison Law lives in Gainesville.

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