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Competition, review will cut county costs

The Tampa Tribune

There is no painless way out of the fiscal box in which Hillsborough County commissioners find themselves.

With tax revenues falling along with property values and retail sales, Administrator Pat Bean reports a \$144 million shortfall in the 2010 budget and says it is likely the county will have to lay off 560 employees.

Park hours will be limited. Key services, including code enforcement, aging services and animal control, likely will be curtailed. Commissioners will explore how to make ends meet in the coming weeks.

Commissioner Kevin Beckner was correct when he told his colleagues, "Now we have to look at a different way of doing business. We have to seriously look at how we work together to conserve resources and work more effectively."

A way to do that would be to follow the example of Tax Collector Doug Belden and compete for the Sterling Award, a state program that recognizes public and private operations for innovation and efficiency. The program was founded by the late Gov. Lawton Chiles and modeled after the Malcolm Baldrige Award, a national program.

It requires agencies to scrutinize every aspect of an operation, set benchmarks and develop a plan for improvement. Auditors review the plans and outcomes.

Belden, whose office won a Governor's Sterling Award last year, says one of the key benefits is that the process empowers employees. Instead of an administrator simply making cuts, the workers themselves find ways to improve performance.

Belden was able to cut his budget - now \$23 million - by 5.6 percent this year, thanks to practices he says are a direct result of the Sterling competition. His office competed three years prior to winning the award, each time finding new ways to improve.

Since entering the competition, his office has cut its budget more than 10 percent while also improving customer service. Because of its ongoing focus on cost-cutting and performance, Belden's office did not have to cut personnel during this year's budget crisis.

Commissioners, to their credit, have taken note. Commissioner Mark Sharpe has arranged for Belden and Sterling officials to appear before the commission on June 17.

Applying the Sterling process to all the county operations would not only generate savings, but also help the county achieve a more efficient operating model. It could be used to coordinate services with the city of Tampa and other local governments.

The tax collector's office has already hosted a well-attended meeting of local agencies to discuss

possible savings in communications and computers. It addressed how they could eliminate duplication, share best practices and achieve discounts by buying together.

Such collaboration and cooperation is going to be essential if local governments are going to be able to continue to meet the public's needs during these treacherous economic times.

Indeed, it's time to take a serious look at the consolidation of some city and county services.

Administrator Bean believes the county operations are already lean, but the goal of the Sterling process is not so much to identify waste as to create a culture of fiscal discipline, innovation, customer focus and accountability that will ensure efficiency.

The Sterling process won't enable the commissioners to sidestep budget cuts, but it should lead to significant savings and help commissioners evaluate just how well the county is performing.