

Tampa Bay Times

A Times Editorial

Editorial: Civil service rules due for update

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Hillsborough County's civil service system helps keep politics out of hiring and firing decisions and gives county employees a formal process for contesting any disciplinary action. But the system also has an archaic side that can keep workers from reaching their potential while making it more difficult for the county to attract the talent it needs in this fast-changing economy. A reform effort by Tax Collector Doug Belden deserves a serious look.

Belden wants to examine whether the 21 separate county agencies covered by civil service should have the option of peeling away some workplace rules. While the proposal is still in the formative stage, Belden said the rules are too restrictive when it comes to classifying jobs and establishing pay scales. County Clerk of Courts Pat Frank agrees. She and Belden say the rules that establish job descriptions and pay are cumbersome and not reflective of the experience, skill sets and job responsibilities that employees must have in today's market. The two elected officials and County Administrator Mike Merrill have begun discussing possible changes.

It's important to be clear about what's not being proposed. Nobody wants to weaken the grievance procedure, cut pay or benefits, or change the process for performance reviews. And civil service still would play an overarching role, operating a centralized jobs bank and testing center for available county jobs. The focus here is on eliminating the many job classifications that have become meaningless in the modern workplace, replacing them with job descriptions that more accurately describe the work and the technical abilities that county employers need. These officials also want the civil service system to speed the process for hiring. Delays have resulted in internal and outside candidates for new jobs being lured away by other employers.

Civil service has a legitimate role in ensuring that applicants for jobs in local government get a fair shake, and in protecting staff in this political environment from retribution. But workplace rules also need to recognize that the office environment has changed, and that employees are taking on duties that don't fit neatly within the confines of old job descriptions. Belden and Frank say they have no intention of acting rashly, or of moving to gut civil service. That's the right attitude. The county should explore this idea with the goal of preserving the purpose of civil service while making it more productive for employees, the agencies and taxpayers.

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