

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Balancing the budget by sacrificing jobs and service

Let me get this straight. In order to balance the 2003 budget, the Knox County Board is proposing to freeze hiring and eliminate a sheriff's deputy position so they (we) can contribute \$30,000 to GREDA, a business development organization formed for the purpose of creating jobs. Am I the only person who questions the logic of this plan?

When I was a member of the county board we once agreed that we had no business giving funds to outside organizations on behalf of the taxpayer. The tax proceeds collected should be used for the business of county government, the basic responsibilities being law enforcement, collection of taxes, elections, keeping records, providing a judicial system, road and bridge maintenance, issuing marriage licenses and other legal documents. If the county is short of money, which is a chronic state, we should be whittling down to the basic necessities of county government.

As soon as we start to do that, of course, anyone involved in the special interest of threatened programs will scream like a stuck pig. That's one characteristic liberals and conservatives have in common. If it affects us or our favorite projects, we object — loudly. Republicans who complain about government interference and the use of government money get really quiet when their pet projects are threatened.

For example: I have suggestions which might save nearly \$120,000 right off the bat. Under the circumstances, we have no business giving \$30,000 a year to GREDA, a private business development corporation.

admirable and necessary. But all Knox County taxpayers shouldn't be obliged to support it and the county board should not be dishing out contributions on our behalf, certainly not if we are sacrificing the jobs of county employees to do it.

So now we've lopped off \$30,000. The next line item could be the salary of Alan Hallberg, the county administrator. He's been earning \$50,000 a year and gets an additional \$3,000 in the new budget — this at the same time he's suggesting a hiring freeze. As far as I can tell, Hallberg has never really understood what he should be doing and has overstepped his bounds a number of times. He once issued an edict about how county board members ought to behave, and that's not only not his responsibility, it's a lost cause. Hallberg is playing with the county budget and appears not to understand or be concerned about the consequences of the possible loss of key employees in county offices.

Hallberg is one of nine department administrators hired by the county, the others being administrators of highways, landfill, Mary Davis Home, nursing home, tax assessments, zoning, health department and public defender. The salaries of the Mary Davis Home supervisor and public defender are partially paid by the 9th Judicial District. The Mary Davis Home, nursing home, landfill and health department are expected to be self-supporting either by fees or special taxes. Add to these our eight elected county officers, and one might conclude our county government is top-heavy with administrators.

from 25 to 15 members in December, perhaps the administrative work could again be handled by the chairman, the executive committee of the board and the eighteen or so remaining managers.

Now we've retrieved the salaries of nearly five, full-time county employees, most of whom, if they were the only breadwinner, would be eligible for food stamps.

Now let's tackle a real sacred cow, the DARE program. I am no judge of whether the program works or not. There are those who feel strongly either way. But the question for the county board is: "Can we afford to spend over \$36,000 on a social services program? Or should county government's priority be to provide the best service possible, which certainly includes keeping an adequate number of key employees in the various offices?"

To avoid finding myself hanging from a rope in the town square, I won't mention the TRIAD program, which I understand fills a great need of the elderly in our county and has just expanded to provide emergency transportation for our older citizens all over the county. You see, now that I'm 66, I'm looking after my own best interests here. Statistics show that 25 percent of our county population may be over the age of 55 within the next 20 years. This contribution, as others, should be examined in years to come.

The bottom line is, the budget for Knox County government should not be balanced by sacrificing key positions in our county offices and reducing available jobs.

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