



CITY OF WINTER SPRINGS, FLORIDA

1126 EAST STATE ROAD 434
WINTER SPRINGS, FLORIDA 32708-2799
Telephone (407) 327-1800

Winter Springs' Budget – A Balancing Act

It's all about Attitude

By Kevin Smith, City Manager

A few short years ago, as governments began their annual budget process in the face of a harsh economic downturn, the City of Winter Springs decided it had had enough...enough of the status quo.

My definition of the status quo is the threadbare approach to governmental budgeting and taxation. Were we facing an endless procession of more taxes? Less services? Were a rock and a hard place the only choices Winter Springs had in a distressed economy? Our answer: Not on our watch.

That's why, three years ago, we decided to reengineer our fiscal game plan to make the city's financial ends meet. It wasn't easy. Winter Springs is a residential community of some 33,000 hard working, positive thinking, hopeful citizens whom we in city government felt deserved more from their leaders than higher taxes and reduced service levels. Despite a 28% drop in our ad valorem tax base during the recession, we decided to try and give our citizens more for less.

The end result?

- We lowered the millage rate for our citizens and businesses.
- We reduced expenses without sacrificing service levels.
- We set the stage for increasing revenues via expansion and diversification of our tax base.
- We maintained a strong "rainy day" fund for economic growth opportunities.

It's all about Attitude

Our path was quite simple, really; sharpen our pencils and cut expenses thoughtfully in order to do more with less. And, most important, ask each city employee to become a member of the Winter Springs Team, a team that would not accept the notion that feeding the tax monster was inevitable.

Were we spoiling for a fight? Maybe, but our enemy was the prospect of having to raise taxes like so many other cities. So, we attacked our adversary as a team, with a vision and a plan. Sound hokey? Perhaps, but maybe the world needs to be a little more "hokey" these days.

It Takes a Team

As iconic football coach Vince Lombardi said, “Individual commitment to a group effort; that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work”.

Our vision and plan didn’t just happen. Three budget cycles ago, we clearly described our fiscal plan to our team and took the time to help them understand that this paradigm was not only necessary but the right thing to do. I was particularly encouraged by the way department directors met the challenges head on by finding innovative ways to do more with less. It soon became an internal competition among members of the management and employee team to come up with ideas about outsourcing, automation, personnel reorganization (staffing was reduced 20% during that period) and other initiatives to save tax dollars without sacrificing taxpayer services.

Challenge the Process

The team was asked to constantly “challenge the process” by looking for ways of doing things more effectively each day rather than just at budget time. The “zero-based budget” may seem like a cliché in some circles, but Winter Springs embraced it over the traditional incremental approach, saving considerable dollars and further cementing a mindset of facing our fiscal fears and responsibilities head on. By scrutinizing, challenging and defending every dollar spent, we sent a message to our citizens that they would be given a millage rate reflecting only that which was justified for delivering essential services.

And, The Winners Are ...

As a result of this team effort, services in Winter Springs were not only maintained but, in many instances, improved. Crime rates dropped, the rainy day fund remained inviolate, our economic “engine” ran more smoothly, AND our citizens saw lower tax bills. While Winter Springs, like so many other communities throughout America, was not immune from the impact of a bad economy, it is important to note that the city’s initiative was less a response to economic conditions and more to an adherence to our new fiscal plan. In other words, we were going to implement these cost-saving initiatives irrespective of the nation’s revenue challenges.

Residents could also take pride in the designation by *Money Magazine* of Winter Springs as one of the “Most Livable Cities” in the US in 2011. It was in recognition of the fact that Winter Springs is a great place to live, not just because it is an economical place to live, although saving money doesn’t hurt.

In the end, after all the numbers are crunched, it still boils down to attitude; an attitude about working together as a team, top to bottom, and an attitude toward our “bosses”, the citizens of Winter Springs. It’s about doing the right thing, even if it’s not easy. As a wise person once said, “It’s hard when you have to. It’s easier when you want to”.