MIAMI TODAY

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# 2 is a lonely number as hundreds of thousands face tax hikes

I have unearthed two Miami-Dade residents who swear the county isn't seeking a tax hike. I have found at least 251,002 who are going to yell bloody murder that it's raising taxes sky high.

Michael Lewis

The two alone are Mayor Carlos Alvarez and County Manager George Burgess, who gets his own say – incredible as it may be – on this page.

I'm one of the 251,002. Another is Commissioner Javier Souto, who this week is holding hearings on "the proposed property tax increases" that the mayor and manager say don't exist.

The other 251,000 to ask what the hell Mr. Burgess could possibly be talking about are homeowners who face 15.2% tax payment hikes for county operating expenses and almost 60% more for debt service.

These 251,000 all fall under the Save Our Homes property protection program, which was created so that owners don't get taxed out of homes by big increases like the one the county plans to hit them with.

Along with these 251,002, every other county taxpayer will pay a double-digit rate increase too unless at September hearings the commission in its wisdom – and under justifiable pressure – backs off from a planned 12.2% hike in operating tax rates and 56% jump in debt service taxes to fund new projects as taxpayers suffer.

That, Mr. Burgess says, is no tax hike. The mayor agrees. But will anyone else?

His claim is that since assessed values fell an average of 13.4% this year, and some far more, massive rate increases don't count as a tax hike because some whose values eroded most, sending net worth plunging, may actually pay a bit less – though far more per dollar of property value.

Since property taxes are based on property value, that's a double-digit tax hike, Mr. Burgess.

We can honestly disagree on the need for this massive increase. Retiring Commissioner Katy Sorenson makes a fair argument for even more – not right, in light of the economy, but fair.

But it's hard to stand up in front of more than 2 million county residents, as the mayor and manager should, and argue with a straight face that 12.2% and 56% increases aren't increases at all because some people whose holdings have been all but wiped out might pay a bit less.

Mr. Burgess shrugs this off by saying that even if tax rates hadn't been hiked through the roof some people would still pay more, others less, just as under his plan.

True, but every taxpayer is to pay an added 12.2% for operations and an added 56% for bonding under the current plan that none would have paid without the massive tax hikes.

That has to be clear to everyone but two people in this county, Mr. Burgess. You must guess which two.

Mr. Burgess relies on a technical definition of a tax revenue increase to claim that it's not a tax increase. As commissioners voted for his rate plan – and under his tutelage added the 56% debt service hike to boot – he carefully coached Bruno Barreiro just how much he could add in library tax without by state law having to send a formal rate hike letter to every property owner.

But whatever technical definitions say, 12.2% and 56% rate hikes indeed raise taxes. You might ask Mr. Burgess to tell you how they could possibly lower your taxes.

In fact, when you get your Truth in Millage notice with your proposed tax payments this month, you might want to thank Mr. Burgess personally for lowering your taxes with 12.2% and 56% rate increases.

The number of his office is (305) 375-5311, and his fax number is (305) 375-1262.

He'll want to hear from you, so that he can add to the number of people who agree that this added burden in a terrible year is no tax rate hike.

He and the mayor now are kind of lonely.

## Letters to the Editor

### Per mayor's budget, most tax bills would in fact fall

Michael Lewis should audition for Cirque du Soleil for his uncanny ability to contort the truth; his performance in the July 15 issue was startling.

Lewis expects your readers to believe that a proposed budget that collects $60 million less next year is somehow a tax increase – twisted logic if ever I've heard it. Applying some voodoo math, he has performed all kinds of millage-rate calculations in an attempt to prove that less money is more money. I don't think this community is buying it. He also argues that a property owner whose tax bill is exactly the same next year as it was last year is plagued by a "huge tax hike," and I don't think this community is buying that, either.

Here are two facts that even the intellectually flexible Lewis can't dispute: most property owners would pay less under the budget that Mayor Alvarez and I proposed, and the County would collect tens of millions less. Here's a third: state law says that's even lower than a no-tax-increase budget.

Under this proposed budget, most property owners would pay less and some would, indeed, pay more. We've never hidden that. But here's Lewis' final act of trickery: he argues that the Board of County Commissioners should simply re-adopt last year's tax rate. What would be the result? Most property owners would pay less and some would pay more.

Maybe Lewis needs a few more rehearsals.

**George M. Burgess**
**County Manager**

**Add Your Views**

**Have an opinion on an issue of importance?**

**Send your letter to editor@miamitodaynews.com, with Letter to the Editor on the topic line.**

# Making the most out of overseas trade missions

With dim prospects for significant improvement in the economy before year's end, hard-hit South Florida continues to struggle with recession – with one exception: international trade.

Jerry Haar

It was welcome news, then, when this year the Obama Administration announced a National Export Initiative (NIE), a plan to double exports over the next five years. The three pillars of the NIE are trade advocacy, improved access to credit for small- and medium-sized businesses that want to export and rigorous enforcement of trade laws to help remove barriers to foreign markets for US firms.

The NIE could not come at a better time. The nation's trade deficit has grown to over $40.3 billion, as exports have been decreasing faster than imports.

Promising though the Administration's new initiative may be (assuming the benefits for small business are not cancelled out by the impacts of income and health care tax increases), South Florida traditionally has been a leader, not a follower, in international trade, especially with respect to its prime customer – Latin America.

There are few better examples of our collective, entrepreneurial engagement with the region than the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's America's Linkage Program. For 11 years now, targeted trade missions to the region have brought buyers and sellers together, opened doors to expanded commercial opportunities and assured the continued prominence of South Florida's professional services firms, in particular, throughout the region.

The critical word here is "prominence," not "dominance." As other regions of the country wake up to the exceptional business opportunities in the world's emerging markets – and that means Latin America – municipalities such as Houston, Atlanta, Seattle and Philadelphia are aggressively pursuing linkage programs of their own.

**The Writer**

Jerry Haar is chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce's Global Intelligence Committee and a professor of business at Florida International University.

For current South Florida exporters to fully benefit from trade missions abroad planning – the right kind of planning – is paramount. The advice is to:

■Conduct a capability assessment of their firm and the host country destination. If a SWOT analysis and financial assessment of the business produce positive results, then it makes sense to get some business intelligence on overseas market opportunities in the country slated for a trade mission. The US Department of Commerce's Country Commercial Guides and a face-to-face meeting with a US Commercial Service representative can prove very helpful.

■Insist on effective matchmaking. Minimize the protocol and maximize the business. Politicians who tag along on what is a junket for them, along with the host country officials who are there for the photo ops, will not bring trade mission participants any business.

Turn to the US Department of Commerce's Gold Key service to meet serious potential buyers of your product or service. Mission organizers should consider sending an advance team down one to two months before to ensure the mission meets the full expectations of both the mission participants and the businesses with whom they will be meeting.

■Be realistic about what a trade mission can and cannot do. Business usually does not happen over night. It takes time to develop a market, build and gain trust. Therefore, it is imperative to set realistic goals about what first meeting can accomplish.

A trade mission is the first stage of an investment in new business. One can return home and say: "Great experience, but I am not ready; therefore, I am saving a bundle by not attempting to enter the market prematurely. When I *am* ready, I will revisit."

■Make sure that marketing and promotional materials, such as catalogs, are professional and appropriate for the target market. Put yourself in your prospective buyer's shoes. Ensure that the message/benefits of your product resonate. Materials that are too glitzy or too drab will not go over well.

■Be sure to follow up with your contacts. A trade mission is not a one-night stand; it should be perceived as key building block for a long-term relationship. Frequent contact with prospective clients is a must. And since face-to-face meetings are the preferred form of doing business in the Americas, follow-up personal visits twice a year – even more – are highly recommended.

South Florida cannot rest on its laurels, even with respect to trade in its neighborhood, Latin America. Outbound trade missions, be they organized and led by chambers of commerce, industry groups or government agencies, must strive continuously to assure both short- and long-term tangible and measurable impacts of their missions.

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