

COMMENTARY

No fatties allowed

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Gov. Charlie Crist and AFS Rebecca Horne share several traits, among them careers in public service, the appearance of fitness and health, a capacity to work hard, and the noteworthy urge to saddle significant responsibility for the lives of others on their own shoulders.

Crist's daily leadership is mostly a matter of logistics — of numbers and ideas and conversations with people who use other numbers and further conversations to influence the direction and shape of our lives here. (Put another way, Crist helps determine how wide we must open our wallets, and what we can demand in return.)

Horne's daily leadership can keep us from dying, injuring ourselves, or growing ill in water — and it can help us remain healthy, as well as teach us how to be responsible for our own health.

Crist governs from an air-conditioned office and Horne teaches, manages and guards from the side of a public pool.

Gov. Crist's full title is governor — in particular of the state of Florida. AFS Horne's full title is aquatic facilities supervisor — in particular of the Lehigh Community Pool, one of four year-around pools maintained by Lee County for the benefit of everyone.

I make this comparison between two public servants only because the governor, in effect, put the aquatic facilities supervisor on a diet when she was already slim and trim. Now the skilled and determined Horne, and her similarly capable pool specialist, Glenn

Pollack, will have to manage the pool mostly by themselves beginning in August. That's because open lifeguard positions, and others in Lee County's Department of Parks and Recreation, 20 in all, have just been frozen.

County officials don't call it a freeze.

"We have not formally "frozen" any positions...we are simply not filling them at this time," said John Yarborough, head of the parks department.

Meanwhile the already popular, 25-meter, 8-lane pool is about to become a lot more popular come October, when it gains a triple-flume water slide and completely new, ADA-approved indoor showers and restrooms, budgeted last year. That will put the Lehigh pool on a par with the Pine Island, North Community and San Carlos pools (each now offers diving, sliding, or both).

It wasn't just Horne; the governor and legislators put a lot of people and programs on a diet when they cut property taxes. (Counterintuitively, perhaps, the county will take in about 8 percent more this year than last in property taxes, since Crist's diet allows for increases in growth and cost of living, but local officials still anticipate significant belt tightening, which is why unfilled lifeguard positions will remain unfilled.) We can argue endlessly about the merits of Crist's plan in general, or of its particulars and how they'll apply, but I'm not here to do that.

I will point out that the day Crist announced his tax cuts, he stood flawlessly tailored, not a pound outsized (unlike the perennially jowly Gov. Jeb Bush), the lean body, long face and aquiline nose beneath sail-white hair all as tightly trimmed as a racing yacht.

His America's Cup grin only hinted at cruelty: a thin guy about to shout, "You fatties are gonna lose some WEIGHT, baby!"

Which would be great if he were a dietician or a personal trainer or captain of the good ship Lollipop — and maybe he should



Horne

have been. He certainly scared the hell out of local governments and officials up one side of the peninsula and down the other.

And thus, how they began to plan for the future — for a wide range of services to the general public — began to grow complicated and constipated rather quickly.

To put this in simplistic terms, property taxes in Florida make up most of the general fund for a given city or county. So when property taxes are reduced by order of the state, local governments have less flexibility, especially if property values have suddenly hopped the downhill train. There's less money to do things that, in theory, contribute to a higher quality of life.

Now understand: Not a word of complaint about this has escaped the lips of

Horne, a graduate of Riverdale High School and Florida Gulf Coast University. (I'm the whiner, not her.) Her brother, Alex Flora, was a lifeguard before her (he's a teacher in Georgia now), and her husband, Mike Horne, also works for Lee County as a facilities supervisor — and if he's anything like her, then the county is damned lucky to have him. It goes without saying that their two daughters, Leanna, 11, and six-year-old Leila, can swim like fish.

At 31, Horne's been pooling for 15 years now, with competence and good cheer. She arrives early each day to check the CO2 that maintains the proper PH levels; she tests the water three times a day (she and Pollack, a University of Florida graduate, are also certified pool operators, which means they can run the complicated and computerized pump and cleansing systems, and understand the chemistry of clean swimming water); she gives various classes, like Pollack, and supervises the young lifeguards — this summer, the finest staff she's ever had, she says.

And one other little thing: she and her staff perform, on average, several rescues each year; they're expert in the use of CPR and defibrillators (each county pool has one).

Her reaction to the diet plan was unhesitating last week: "We'll try to offer the same level of services anyway — we're just going to have to find a way to do it."

But inevitably the cuts will change the level of service and pleasure the public can expect, not that people couldn't do without these things, necessarily. (Although when you see 85-year-olds exercising every day with Horne's or Pollack's gentle encouragement, you know it's a life or death matter.)

But why?

Well never mind that; at least we won't be so damned fat, fiscally speaking. ■



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