



COMMENTARY

Expressway Authority Moves Forward

By RHEA LAW

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We have completed a difficult period in the history of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority. But out of this transition, we have reached a milestone - a time where the issues of the past are indeed behind us, and the authority can concentrate on its important role in solving the transportation needs of our community for the years to come.

There is no question that the ability to maintain our current roads and to build new roads is a critical responsibility of our local governments and that using tolls to do so is essential to limit increases in taxes.

These roads will help to ease congestion for commuters and visitors while they allow movement of products and services to and through our community. The roads are a critical part of commerce, and they contribute to our quality of life. The recent expenditures by the authority in the revitalization of Meridian Street in downtown and new roadways and recreational facilities in Brandon signify the value of reinvesting toll revenues in the local community. Thus, the expressway authority is a critical contributor to our future.

Since the change in leadership - in January of this year - the chairman and executive director have rebuilt relationships, made lasting structural changes, re-established credibility and set a standard for transparency and responsiveness that is unprecedented in the public arena.

We've been through a lot in the last seven months. Since September 2006, the expressway authority has been reviewed and audited by the governor's office and by the auditor general's office, has been a target of unduly skeptical press coverage and has been under the watchful scrutiny of the Legislature and the public. Of note through all of this:

There was no finding of any misfeasance or malfeasance.

There has been full and open disclosure of information and facts.

The action steps recommended by the audits have all been implemented.

The authority has established new ethics policies and procedures that are stringent and direct as to the obligations of those who work for, or serve on, the authority board. All existing members of the authority board and staff members are bound by those rules.

Changes have been made to the board membership.

Two new members will very shortly be appointed to the board by the governor. Before joining, they will be required to confirm their ability to comply with the new ethics policy. More than that, they will bring a new perspective and vision to the authority.

The original proposals for legislation, which would have either abolished the authority or rolled it into another entity, have been withdrawn or placed on hold. This is an indication that our state legislators recognize that the authority has taken the appropriate corrective actions and that the authority, and its significant community assets, should be retained for the benefit of and be accountable to the citizens of Hillsborough County.

It is unfortunate that some who may be driven by private and selfish interests are continuing to dwell on the past. We have moved beyond that. The Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority has made many changes in a very short time. It has become a better agency as a result through the dedication, vision and leadership of its current board members, staff and advisors.

Our new chairman and interim executive director need community support to continue to move the agency forward in responsive and visionary ways. We have just completed a significant search for a new in-house general counsel and communications manager. We are confident that when they come on board, they will provide insight and will support the authority in charting its new course. We did learn from the past, and we must use what we have learned to focus on a future that provides for our community's increasing transportation needs. It's time to do that together.

Rhea Law is the interim general counsel of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Expressway Authority

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