



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
July 24, 2009

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Florida TaxWatch Releases New Recommendations to Improve Escambia County Government

TALLAHASSEE — The Florida TaxWatch Center for Local Government Studies has released the results of a second analysis of Escambia County government. The study, which was requested and funded by the Escambia County Taxpayers Association, identifies a number of ways that County government could be changed to improve efficiency, transparency, accountability, and to generally better serve the taxpayer of Escambia County. The report, [*Improving Accountability and Transparency in Escambia County Government: Phase II*](#), follows-up on, and builds upon, another report on Escambia County government released last year ([*Improving Transparency and Accountability in Escambia County Government*](#), June 2008).

“This report will help the elected officials of Escambia County work to better serve the taxpayers who have entrusted them with public office,” said **Dominic M. Calabro**, President and CEO of the Tallahassee-based nonpartisan research institute and government watchdog, Florida TaxWatch. “In these difficult fiscal and economic times, it is vital that we all work together to improve efficiencies in government, so that we can preserve vital government services that are needed by all citizens, especially the most vulnerable among us, without raising taxes on our families and businesses when we can all least afford it. In addition to providing this report, Florida TaxWatch will work with the Escambia County Taxpayer Association and government officials to ensure the implementation of these recommendations. I call on all elected officials to step up their efforts to implement these types of cost-savings ideas. In business, they say that good managers are ones that see the opportunity in the difficulty, not the difficulty in the opportunity; right now we need government officials willing to find the opportunity in these difficult times, not just see the difficulties in these opportunities.”

The report finds, among other things:

- Escambia County taxpayers pay more per resident served than in comparable peer counties. The report identifies potential cost reductions for the Escambia County Sheriff’s Office between \$12.3 and \$27.3 million in comparison with the peer counties.
- Several million dollars per year in Local Option Sales Tax (LOST) funds were expended on vehicles, equipment, and certain operating expenses, which raises concern from a public policy standpoint. Additionally, the expenditure and loan of all LOST funds may not have been adequately described nor explicitly shared with Escambia taxpayers.

- The Pensacola Civic Center has lost money each year of operation since FY 2004 at a cost of nearly \$10 million to the taxpayers of Escambia County. The operating deficit has been between 26 and 41 percent for each of the last five years.

The report makes a number of specific recommendations, including:

- Information about the LOST funds should be offered in more detail in order to avoid misleading the public or further eroding public trust, and a Citizen Advisory Board should be created to advise the Board of County Commissioners on issues related to the promotion of proper and effective use of LOST funds.
- To achieve a quality workforce and the best value for taxpayers, the Board should develop a more strategic and publicly accountable approach to managing salary and benefits costs.
- Due to the potential for significant cost savings through increased collaboration between Escambia County and other local government entities, the County should develop a strategic approach to achieve these savings through leveraging organizational strengths and purchasing power, and eliminating duplication of effort among government entities
- The County could achieve a potential cost savings of \$1.8 million to \$5.35 million per year with the implementation and usage of a better benchmark for facility space usage and utilization.
- The formation of a Citizens Advisory Board for the Pensacola Civic Center would provide proper oversight and encourage additional ways to reduce the level of public funding necessary to support ongoing operations. The lack of a meaningful financial incentive built into the facilities management contract should also be analyzed.
- There potential cost savings through outsourcing the County ambulance operations or through the possible merger of ambulance and fire services should be explored.
- The County should establish a “hotline” where instances of fraud, waste, and abuse of County resources can be reported to further identify cost savings and inefficiency. Additionally, as in the previous report, this report recommends that the County create an independent audit function to assist County management in finding ways to reduce costs and foster greater public trust.
- The County should consider all potential opportunities to reduce the county’s social security tax costs, including offering a 401(a) FICA Alternative Plan.
- While the County currently has a broad-based program to recognize exemplary government employees, Florida TaxWatch recommends the program enlist a more targeted focus that fosters a culture of cost savings.
- Florida TaxWatch recommends that the County sell or lease unnecessary or underutilized County assets, renegotiate contracts, and reevaluate equipment and technology expenditures.

A copy of the full report is available at www.FloridaTaxWatch.org/CLGS or by [clicking here](#).

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Florida TaxWatch is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan research institute that over its 30 year history has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens’ hard-earned tax dollars. Its mission is to provide the citizens of Florida and public officials with high quality, independent research and education on government revenues, expenditures, taxation, public policies and programs and to increase the productivity and accountability of Florida state and local government. Its support comes from homeowners and retirees, small and large businesses, philanthropic foundations, and professional associations. On the web at www.FloridaTaxWatch.org.