

## News-Press

Estimated printed pages: 2

April 30, 2009

**Section:** local & state

**Edition:** all

**Page:** 9B

### **Guest Opinion: Lee residents should be able to elect their county manager**

*Matt Caldwell*

By Matt Caldwell - Guest Opinion

As of 2009, Lee County now has over 600,000 residents.

To put this in perspective, consider the following places: Iceland, Belize, Vermont, and Wyoming. Each of these places has a smaller population than Lee County.

Two of them have seats at the United Nations, while the others each have multiple seats in Congress.

Based on this comparison, Lee County is deserving of not only national prestige, but international recognition.

While I am not advocating secession from the great State of Florida, I do believe that this comparison demands an examination of our current form of local government.

The citizens of Lee County adopted a charter form of government in 1996.

In changing, we modeled ourselves after the separated powers system found in the United States and Florida constitutions.

We have a Board that serves in the capacity of our local legislature and, to balance their power, we have an Executive Branch which is charged with governing the county bureaucracy.

Unfortunately, we did not fully separate their powers by allowing the citizens to elect their executive leader.

Rather, the Board retains the sole authority to employ our county manager.

As an example, under our current system, Congress would have the power to hire or fire President Obama at will.

Politics being what it is, this system led to paralysis on the Board when it came to changing our executive leadership, so that it has taken egregious violations of county policy to realize a change.

In deference to the outgoing manager, he provided much needed stability and maturity Downtown at the time of his arrival.

However, since the turn of the century, he has overseen exponential growth in county government, with budgets growing two to three times faster than our population and inflation.

We now have a county budget larger than some states and more than a billion in taxpayer dollars sitting in the bank.

As an elected position, it is most certain that he would have faced a challenge in the last few election cycles.

"But," some might say, "how do we know such a change would work?"

The answer is easy to find. We already have five elected executive officers in Lee County: Sheriff, Clerk of Court, Supervisor of Elections, Tax Collector, and Property Appraiser.

Each of these constitutional officers is the executive head of their agency and the Board serves solely as their legislative body for budget approval.

In fact, considering the personalities currently occupying these offices, I would submit that we are doing extraordinarily well with these elected executives.

Our county has grown rapidly in the last two decades and the private sector has eagerly shed the inadequacies of yesteryear.

It is time we recognized the scope of our County and took advantage of a system of truly separated powers, with the associated checks and balances.

I urge the Board to place this issue on the 2010 general ballot and appoint one of our many able staff persons to serve as interim manager until that time.

— Matt Caldwell of Lehigh Acres is a member of the Lee County Republican Executive Committee, served on the Lee County Charter Review Committee and ran for Florida Senate in 2008.

---

Copyright (c) The News-Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.