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I CAME. I SAW.

Two is a lonely number as hundreds of thousands face tax hikes

By Michael Lewis
Commentary

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.

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.

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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.

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