

From the *Tallahassee Democrat*

Florida loses its vision
Some legislators are blinded by budget cuts

Michelle Rehwinkel Vasilinda • My View • April 18, 2009

As a new member of the House of Representatives, I have already made many friendships with both Republican and Democrats who care deeply about the people we were elected to serve.

What binds my colleagues together is much more important and valuable than what separates us. We must stop political posturing or adherence to ideology that ignores common sense and the needs of Floridians.

With only two weeks remaining in the 2009 legislative session, any hope of coming to consensus on a budget that reflects a strategy that recognizes the world's changing energy paradigm, the need for the highest quality education, the opportunity to surge ahead with economic development that creates a cleaner, safer and more beautiful environment is dim, but not completely extinguished.

A better future is within our grasp; we must not let it slip away.

My heart aches at the thought of what Florida may become. We are throwing overboard any chance of being a competitor in the global economy. Florida could be working to position itself to be a leader. No one, however, can lead without vision.

Sadly, some of my colleagues are being stiff-necked and stubbornly adhering to a worn-out ideology. So far, no other vision has been offered by those with "stiff necks" except to continue to lower taxes, diminish government and privatize.

The only solution to our economic crisis that they are able to see is to slash our quality of life by making a long list of severe cuts including university budgets, K-12, pre-K, infant mortality, wellness programs, children's health care, social programs, after-school programs, vocational rehabilitation, prison rehabilitation, mental-health treatment, law enforcement, land conservation, and state workers across the board, without any

calculation as to the effect on our economy, our environment, our children, or our safety and security.

My grandmothers would declare us "penny wise and pound foolish!" The late Gov. Lawton Chiles would have said, "We are eating our seed corn!"

One thing is certain: It is well-educated, healthy and productive people and well-nurtured children with diverse talents and gifts who will build our economy. The more Floridians tossed to the curb as the result of budget cuts to education, health care and worthy programs, the fewer Floridians able and ready to work and the less deep our "bench."

Bills that I and my some of my colleagues have sponsored to remove tax exemptions, raise the cigarette tax, streamline Internet sales for tax fairness, and a penny sales tax — all proposals to help fund education and essential state functions — run into that brick wall, which is the oath taken by some legislators to ideologue Grover Norquist with a refusal to raise any additional revenue.

As elected representatives, our duty is to place the principles of our precious U.S. and Florida constitutions and our enduring mission statement, the Declaration of Independence, above what any one man or woman might demand of us. We took an oath as elected officials to do what is right and good for Florida's citizens and to forge a path, create a vision and strategy to move us forward into a better future for our state.

Florida is at the bottom of the 50 states for high-school graduation rates. We are near the bottom in how much we spend per student, quality of learning, and student preparation. Many young, creative and talented young people will choose not to move to Florida to work and raise children. Some of our own children may not want to stay unless things change. Floridians are competitive, and we take great pride in our families and our state. Now that we know the truth about where we stand, we cannot stand idle and lose this most important of all competitions.

Balancing the budget on the backs of state workers, public-school teachers, university professors and students is unfair, unjust and just not smart.

With less cash, these laid-off and financially squeezed workers will buy one less haircut, fewer pots of flowers at the local nursery, one less spaghetti dinner at the "mom and pop" restaurant down the street. Certainly, fewer cars and homes are being purchased. State employees and teachers are not the folks who have their money in off-shore accounts or spend much of their money out of state or overseas. They spend most of their money right here in Florida. Cut them, and we cut small businesses to the core.

Our government is not separate from us; it is us. If you want better schools, a chance for your children and yourselves to survive and thrive in this highly competitive innovation economy, raise your voices, write letters, e-mail us, march to the Capitol, and then, after session is over, make sure you vote.