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Our views: Our 2009 agenda

Reviving the economy with focus toward strengthening Brevard County's future is foremost goal this year

New Year's Day dawns troubled.

Our nation is facing its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and many in our community are losing their jobs, their homes and their hope.

We're clear-eyed realists about the hard days ahead, but our optimism in the future of our community remains undiminished.

The Space Coast has weathered storms before and will weather this one, coming through, we believe, stronger and positioned to ensure long-term growth and prosperity in this young century.

Our priorities for the year reflect that as we confront today's economic ills while laying out a course for tomorrow in five key areas. They are:

Creating more jobs

The rising tide of unemployment — it's now 8.1 percent in Brevard — must be reversed and Main Street returned to work.

The federal government has powerful means to help that happen with the new president and Congress passing an economic stimulus package to start righting the ship by creating jobs to rebuild infrastructure and boost clean energy technology.

The levers of fiscal policy also should be wisely used to break the credit freeze that's strangling business with painful results across Brevard. To help those hurt the worst, unemployment and food stamp benefits should be expanded.

Efforts also must continue in Washington, Tallahassee and locally to prepare for the end of NASA's shuttle program next year and create a new generation of high-technology jobs to return America to the moon and use the expertise of Kennedy Space Center workers to launch renewable energy industries.

Particular attention should be paid to commercial space initiatives such as the contract awarded last week to California-based Space X to use the company's Falcon rockets to ferry supplies from Cape Canaveral to the International Space Station. The result could be 1,000 local jobs.

Developing business

The government can jump-start the economy in the short term, but the best way to grow and expand business is fostering the entrepreneurial spirit of Brevardians.

That means supporting more programs like Brevard Community College's Small Business Development Center, the Technological Research and Development Authority's Business Incubator Center in Melbourne and similar efforts at Florida Tech.

It also means funding the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast to lure new business, streamlining government regulations to make it easier for businesses to expand and providing tax breaks and economic incentive packages when justified to attract companies.

Finally, it means Brevard business leaders stepping forward to fashion a more cooperative strategy between the private sector and government to spur business growth.

Funding education

The economic crisis is poised to decimate Florida's public school system and threaten the goal of building a technology-based, 21st-century work force that can compete in the global economy.

That can't be allowed to happen.

Brevard has lost \$90.6 million in school funding since 2007, forcing it to cut positions, slash budgets, nix academic programs and put off facility maintenance.

Next year, minus decisive action from the state, Florida's schools will face devastating reductions. They could include large teacher and staff layoffs, closing neighborhood schools, axing vital electives, canceling athletics and irrevocably harming students.

The ball is in the Legislature's court to take reasonable steps to increase revenues so schools can survive the recession and be poised for solid advancement during the recovery.

But the public, including parents, businesses and civic groups, must also stand up with a loud outcry in support of education.

The future of Florida and its children is at stake if they don't.

Helping the needy

State lawmakers reacted to budget holes last year with deep cuts to agencies that provide social services — from foster care to help for the disabled — and worse damage is on the way starting with this month's special session.

Meanwhile, more Florida and Brevard residents are struggling to cover basic necessities such as food, rent and mortgages.

Lawmakers in Washington and the Legislature should continue to encourage efficiencies, but also take bold action to find new, prudent revenue.

But the poor, hungry and homeless can't wait, which is why the community must take greater responsibility now for aiding the most vulnerable among us.

Brevard agencies already are tapping the resources of volunteer and faith-based groups, such as the newly formed Brevard Interfaith Coalition, to combat the economic crisis, rising unemployment and hunger on the Space Coast.

Government and private entities will have to coordinate their activities more tightly to preserve a safety net for the needy during the recession. More local corporations also should step up to take responsibility for the greater community's well-being.

And those of us who can afford to should use our time and finances to aid organizations ranging from food pantries to groups that help struggling seniors.

Providing health care

President-elect Barack Obama has asserted the economic downturn makes major health care reform even more imperative.

We'll be looking with great interest and support for action coming from Washington to fix the nation's broken medical system, which has left 47 million Americans with no health care coverage.

We'll also be watching to see if the new Cover Florida initiative offering low-cost, stripped-down insurance plans actually has any value and if state lawmakers work harder this year to make comprehensive coverage affordable.

The economic crisis is likely to prevent significant movement on health care from either federal or state government this year. That's why county commissioners should keep community health care programs high on their priority list for scarce funding.

And why local health care groups such as hospitals and doctors' groups should start putting their heads together — instead of butting them as adversaries — to figure out ways to provide care as efficiently and economically as possible to Space Coast residents.
