

# TAMPA TRIBUNE

and The Tampa Times

## COUNTY BUDGET

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70 or so county employees scheduled to be laid off in September. Eliminating Medrano's position would have saved \$122,720 a year in salary and benefits.

"Even though she may be hardworking," Merrill said, "we have a number of folks who are hardworking and have been laid off before in the last round, and I think it would be disrespectful to those employees to single one person out in this process."

Unlike the other employees scheduled to be pink-slipped, Medrano had generated a barrage of support from Hispanics and others who said she had helped guide them through the maze of land-use regulations. Dozens of sign-waving Medrano supporters showed up at the July 15 commission budget workshop to support her. Petitions asking that her job be spared were signed by thousands of people, mostly Hispanics.

Commissioner Kevin White made the motion to keep Medrano, saying she had done a "remarkable" job reaching across the county's ethnic boundaries to help people with problems rezoning land, acquiring building permits or opening small businesses.

"And I think it would be a disservice to (the planning department) and our county to eliminate this position at this time when we have such a wonderful, smooth operation going," White said.

Also supporting Medrano were Commissioners Rose Ferlita, Ken Hagan and Kevin Beckner. Commissioners Mark Sharpe, Al Higginbotham and Jim Norman voted to eliminate the position. Norman said sparing one worker amounted to micromanaging by the commission and violated the county charter, which puts such actions in the hands of the county administrator.

"He's our professional

manager at this point," Norman said. "We empower him to run this organization, and this cannot turn into a free-for-all political process of hand-selecting employees."

In other action, Commission Chairman Ken Hagan made a motion to use \$9.4 million to expand three libraries — Bloomingdale, Upper Tampa Bay and Jimmie B. Keel — and speed up construction of the new Robert B. Saunders Library.

The one-time money came from more than four years of cost-cutting in preparation for sinking property tax values, said Joe Stines, library director. For instance, students who shelved books were laid off and replaced by existing staff. To give employees time to shelve the books, the libraries opened an hour later at 10 a.m.

The original impetus to expand the three libraries was made after the county library board was "bombaraded" with requests from the public and local Friends of the Library groups, Stines said.

"We even had to move the library board meetings to a larger room at the John F. Germany Library because we had so many citizens coming every time we meet (saying) we need more people space," he said.

The commission also restored \$200,000 to the Arts Council to be used for grants to smaller organizations, and \$292,055 to the Environmental Protection Commission so EPC employees won't have to take 12 unpaid furlough days.

Tax rates were reduced from 10.7614 mills to 10.7598 mills. For someone with a \$200,000 home and the standard \$50,000 homestead exemption, the property tax will be 24 cents lower next year.

"It's a very, very small millage reduction," said county budget director Eric Johnson. "It's the same as last year. It reflects from our perspective a statement to the community on the board's intent not only not to raise the millage, but to lower it."

Reporter Mike Salinero can be reached at (813) 259-8303.

## Ombudsman is spared in county budget

Hillsborough commissioners also trim property taxes for 2011.

By MIKE SALINERO  
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TAMPA » A Spanish-speaking ombudsman retained her job, and funding for several projects and agencies was restored Wednesday as Hillsborough County commissioners made adjustments to the fiscal 2011 budget.

For the 18th year in a row, commissioners lowered property taxes slightly, saving most homeowners less than \$1 on their annual tax bill. They also approved expanding three libraries and speeding up construction on a fourth.

Perhaps the most controversial of the budget adjustments involved Maricela Medrano, the ombudsman in the Planning and Growth Management Department. Medrano kept her job by a 4-3 vote despite a recommendation by interim county administrator Mike Merrill that the position be cut. Medrano was among

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Medrano

*Submitted into the "Record" 7/30/2010  
By: Gerald L. White, Sr., Hillsborough County  
Charter Review Board*

THE **FRIDAY** 7.16.2010

# TAMPA TRIBUNE

and The Tampa Times

## Residents voice support of employee

Dozens attended a meeting to ask the county not to cut the land-use ombudsman position.

By **CHRISTIAN M. WADE**  
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**TAMPA** » Of the hundreds of jobs shed by Hillsborough County in recent years, none has sparked a full-scale movement to save a county employee from the budget ax — until now.

On Thursday, dozens of mostly Hispanic residents packed a budget hearing and pleaded with county commissioners to spare Maricela Medrano's job as the county's land-use ombudsman. Medrano is one of 73 employees expected to lose their jobs by Sept. 25 as the county tries to plug a \$65 million budget shortfall for next fiscal year.

"She plays a key role for everyone in this community," said Harry Vanden, a University of South Florida professor and friend of Medrano, as he presented a petition with more than 4,000 signatures from residents who want her to keep her job. "It's a vital position."

Medrano assists people who are not developers, engineers or lawyers in navigating the county's land-use regulations. She worked for six years as an urban planner for Tampa's city government before becoming the county land-use ombudsman in April 2003.

Though she isn't the only county employee who speaks both Spanish and English, supporters said her language skills and knowledge have helped hundreds throughout the county.

"She is very, very important for the Hispanic community," said Raul Hernandez.

Shelly Glennon, of Valrico, said Medrano doesn't just represent Hispanic residents.

"Maricela there for everyone in the county," she said. "She represents the layperson."

The outpouring of support for Medrano has spurred at least one county commissioner to ask the board to reconsider restoring her position in the fiscal year 2011 budget.

At a budget workshop held earlier Thursday, Hillsborough Commissioner Rose Ferlita "flagged" the ombudsman's position for more discussion at a July 28 board meeting.

Several people also asked the commissioners to restore funding for the Arts Council, which stands to lose nearly 40 percent of its funding in the budget.

Commissioner Kevin Beckner has requested that the county restore \$200,000 in funding for the Arts Council, a proposal that also is expected to be discussed at future meetings.

Reporter Christian M. Wade can be reached at (813) 259-7679.

# THE THURSDAY 7.15.2010 TAMPA TRIBUNE

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## HISPANIC LIAISON

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**Medrano**  
*Helps people  
navigate  
land-use  
regulations*

\$65 million budget gap.

Many Hispanic residents, hearing she may lose her job, have come to her defense and are expected to show up in force at the county's first public hearing on the budget at 6 p.m. today. The county commission also will hold a budget workshop this afternoon at 1:30.

"She's the middleman between the Spanish-speaking people and the authorities," said Daniel Ocegueda, former principal of a charter school who works with migrant families. "She not only addresses the people to the appropriate authorities, she knows the applications and she helps them fill them."

A native of Mexico, Medrano has a bachelor's degree in urban planning from the university in her hometown of Aguascalientes, Mexico, and a master's degree in public administration from the University of South Florida.

She worked for nearly six years as an urban planner for Tampa's city government before becoming the county land-use ombudsman in April 2003.

Ombudsman is a Swedish term for someone who investigates citizens' complaints and serves as an

intermediary between them and the government or another powerful body. The county position was created because the department interacts with so many residents. From building an addition onto a house to opening a small business, residents must apply for permits or be fined.

"I help citizens who don't have the money to hire a consultant or attorney," said Medrano, the only ombudsman in the department. "Many of them don't even speak the (English) language. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for them to go through the land-use permitting process."

Nonetheless, the position is not deemed crucial to Planning and Growth Management's core mission — helping people build things, said planning director Peter Aluotto.

Aluotto said he must eliminate 19 positions this year. In deciding which to keep, Aluotto said he gave priority to "things that result in taxable value being added to the tax rolls."

"The ombudsman, while it is important, isn't on that production line that results

in the quantity of development approvals, we give," Aluotto said.

Department directors' cuts are not final, however, and Medrano could get a reprieve from commissioners if they are convinced her services are vital.

Medrano has helped herself in that respect by speaking regularly about land-use issues on Spanish radio stations. The broadcasts, addressing issues such as "When do I need a permit?" have made Medrano's name familiar to Hispanic residents. Many who hear her later seek Medrano's help on a zoning or building problem.

News that her job is on the line has coursed through Hispanic communities, Ocegueda said. Petitions on her behalf are circulating, and a big crowd is expected tonight to show solidarity.

At least one commissioner, Rose Ferlita, said she has heard the clamor in support of Medrano from her constituents and is sympathetic. Ferlita, who is of Italian and Spanish heritage, represents a district with large Hispanic populations in Town 'N Country, Tampa and south Hillsborough County.

"The Hispanic community considers her valuable, and so do I," Ferlita said. "I think the service is definitely needed in the Hispanic community."

## Hispanic ombudsman's job on the line

Supporters will rally to spare  
land-use liaison's post tonight.

By MIKE SALINERO  
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TAMPA » In a county where nearly a quarter of the residents are classified as Hispanic, the only bilingual employee in the county Planning and Growth Management Department is on the verge of losing her job.

Maricela Medrano, Hillsborough County's land-use ombudsman, helps people who are not developers, engineers or lawyers navigate the county's labyrinthine land-use regulations. Though she is fluent in English and Spanish, Medrano is one of 73 employees expected to lose their jobs Sept. 25 as the county tries to close a

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