



Indiscriminate tax cuts not the answer - OUR OPINION: A job summit called by state lawmakers should focus on real reform

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Facing an 11.5 percent unemployment rate and a home foreclosure crisis, Floridians are desperately seeking a long-term fix to this stubborn recession.

One million are looking for work, according to the latest figure, the highest in 34 years. And that doesn't include those forced to work part-time until the economy recovers.

Job creation is supposed to pick up next year as federal stimulus dollars finally start to finance shovel-ready projects in cities throughout Florida. But after three years of belt-tightening in Tallahassee, legislative leaders are looking for ways to spark private-sector jobs.

Senate President-designate Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, and House Speaker-designate Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, have called for a job summit for Jan. 14-15 in Orlando. The goal, they say, is to remove barriers to job creation, develop financial and tax incentives to lure jobs to Florida and help struggling employers create new jobs and retain existing ones.

Sounds like a plan -- unless this is just one more ruse to continue to lower corporate taxes, as Gov. Charlie Crist now proposes, without any real diversification in Florida's economy.

The tough truth is that Florida can't continue to count on new subdivisions and condo flippers to bail it out. More people are moving out of the state than are moving here, and economists are predicting that even when growth returns it will be slow going.

Tax incentives and fewer regulations for developers aren't the solution. Neither is oil drilling as close as five miles from Florida's coasts as Mr. Cannon has proposed. Those are desperate measures that will hurt Florida residents' quality of life and not help the unemployed in the long term.

There may be tax incentives worth pursuing for bio-tech, green energy like solar, clean mass transit and other industries that would expand Florida's tourism- and services-dependent economy.

But if the summit defines jobs solely based on indiscriminate tax cuts it will only create an ever bigger crater in meeting the public needs of education, health and safety.

It's unfortunate, too, that Gov. Crist appears to have gone AWOL.

Campaigning for the U.S. Senate, the governor hasn't devoted the time he should to finding more ways to rev up Florida's economy. He should have been calling a job summit a year ago.

His proposal this month to cut corporate taxes is more campaign ploy than reality check. Corporate taxes in Florida may need some tweaking in certain sectors, but they are not anywhere near as high as in most other states.

Without an income tax and having resisted any common sense approach to applying sales taxes to some services like lawncare and legal fees, Florida's tax structure -- not its tax rate -- remains the real culprit.

So here we are facing another tough year, but that doesn't mean the problems are insurmountable.

The housing bubble has burst, which offers an opportunity for the state -- and local governments -- to widen the jobs horizon to those jobs that move Florida forward into new technologies and better wages.

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