

The Miami Herald

Crist and Scott camps sling mud, overlook issues



By Helen Aguirre Ferré
August 16, 2014

Among the candidates running to lead the state of Florida, two share the title of governor and in a very real sense are both running for reelection. Democrat Charlie Crist and Republican Rick Scott are in a tight race which will likely be determined in Miami-Dade County.

That explains why both candidates for lieutenant governor are Hispanic and from Miami-Dade county. Predictably, both campaigns are devoting more time slinging mud at each other than discussing the critical issues facing the state. That is unfortunate, of course, because voters are looking for a leader who will tackle the critical issues that can no longer be ignored. For decades, the Sunshine State has been able to build itself out of economic downturns. But construction can no longer sustain the needs of the ever-growing population.

In southeastern Florida, seven counties — Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm beach, Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River — have a combined population larger than that of 35 states. More than a third of residents are foreign-born, coming from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Colombia, Venezuela, Honduras and the Dominican Republic to name a few.

This region is called the “cruise capital of the world” and is heavily dependent on the service industry. It boasts 1,400 multinational businesses. Although more than 230,000 jobs have been added in the last 14 years, the poverty rate in this region is higher than the rest of the state as a whole.

Southeastern Florida is in desperate need of implementing a master plan. It continues to grow disparately and with little regard for the necessary infrastructure, much less the necessary investments in areas of common concern such as transportation, early education, affordable housing, rising sea levels and climate change. This is most critical in the southeastern region of Florida, which is home to a largely diverse population and growing income disparity.

Consider this: The cost of housing and transportation consume 75 percent of the income of a middle class family. These are some of the findings of Seven50, an organization comprised of public officials, civic leaders and urban planners working to provide guidelines that will lead the seven participating southeastern counties toward prosperous and viable growth during the next 50 years. It requires cross-county leaders to work together and speak with one voice, which is most effective.

We are interconnected communities. Many who live in Broward work in Miami-Dade and vice versa. The same applies to those who live in Broward and Palm Beach counties. It only makes sense that transportation needs, for example, be addressed together.

By working together, the seven counties stand a better chance to compete for the required funding from Tallahassee and Washington D.C. than if they go it alone. Regional cooperation as opposed to regional cannibalization: what a refreshing approach to public policy! Additionally, Seven50 calls for the establishment of a business consortium to grow high-tech industries in fields such as biotechnology and healthcare that will provide good-paying jobs and an improved quality of life.

This will also require attention toward other drivers of economic growth and development, such as water, which is often overlooked.

Water is critical to economic growth and development. We are surrounded by water but little of it is potable. Climate change is already here. Salt water seeping into water well fields will affect our water supply. There is little hope for a reasonable quality of life without a good supply of fresh water.

It is also increasingly difficult to be healthy and successful without access to a good education. It needs to start early. One of the suggestions is to extend pre-K education from the current three hours to six hours.

Good jobs require that residents have greater access to higher education and continued education throughout their lifetime. Currently, there are too many residents who are unemployed or underemployed. When was the last time you heard either Crist or Scott speak of these?

It is ironic that both campaigns have concluded that the election will likely be decided by South Florida voters and yet these issues barely are glossed over. It would be refreshing to hear Scott and Crist address the strategies they would support to help the region become more affordable and economically prosperous.

If it is good for the southern region, you know it is going to be great for the rest; our economic success enriches Tallahassee's coffers.