

"Government Lite"

Marsha Segal-George

The town of Fort Myers Beach, Florida, calls its philosophy of governance "Government Lite." The town believes that its methodology has caused the incubation of a new government life form. The goal is to exert local control while attempting to keep that local control simple, thin, and rather elegant. As the need for new services grows or expands, the town tries to find other private and public groups or agencies that can take on those responsibilities rather than the simple, spare local government structure.

If local government administrators refuse to allow their governments to grow, then protection of a growing bureaucracy, or turf, is never an issue. Instead, the government is looking to *incubate*, *create*, and *spin off* initiatives and ideas—all of which are private sector, entrepreneurial, and corporate culture goals.

Similarly, the local government is turned outward, always in a service delivery mode, rather than inward, looking to create and extend bureaucracy and process. In Fort Myers Beach, we in the town government believe that this philosophy launches

**Fort Meyers
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the public sector in the same direction as the private sector. Government is pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities to deal effectively with community issues and problems. Meeting this goal on behalf of the residents is comparable to a private corporation's announcement of profits to its stockholders.

Dollars that the government returns directly to the community, in the form of community services and capital projects, are the profits. Government must minimize overhead so that these government dollars are directly providing services. Many government structures confuse this necessary element of Government Lite, turn inward, and spend all their revenues on internal gyrations that produce no services. On the surface, they may be cutting back and holding the line on taxes, but residents are getting nothing for their money but internal, administrative tail chasing.

Government Lite seeks to address the basic problem that people try to articulate when asked about local government. People want local control over local issues, yet they are reluctant to form a new city or town because of the fear of a bloating bureaucracy and the corresponding tax increases. Further, people express feelings of alienation from government, a discontent that decisions are being made about their lives without their being part of the decision-making process.

This Philosophy Works

Fort Myers Beach was formed on December 31, 1995, with this philosophy of Government Lite. The residents of Estero Island wanted local control over issues but a limited government with few employees and a limited budget. The town's charter was restrictive and put boundaries on financing and bonding options. All of these preliminary restrictions were developed to prevent this new government from growing.

From the beginning, most citizens and the media loudly stated that such a philosophy was an idealistic pipe

dream at best and election rhetoric at worst. They opined that the budget process would show that it couldn't be done and that the new town would immediately go bankrupt and lose its way and philosophy.

The local daily newspaper editorialized that it would be watching us in the new town, basically watching us fail. Perhaps, without a well-formed philosophy of Government Lite, this is what would have happened. Instead, we created a form of governance that does work and that achieves some truly amazing things. On the town's first anniversary, that same local newspaper's editors expressed profuse congratulations on our unexpected success.

Town Description

Fort Myers Beach has a seasonal peak population of 35,000, with a year-round population of 7,588. It is a barrier island approximately seven miles long. The town totally encompasses the island and extends from bridge to bridge, which means that there are only two ways out.

The median household income is \$39,031 (1990). There is a mix of residential and business/tourist uses on this congested and narrow island. A number of serious problems have been lingering in the community for years. There are severe evacuation problems in the event of a hurricane; the main (and only) arterial is designated a constrained roadway. Because of limitations imposed by its location on a barrier island, this roadway always will remain a two-lane road and will not be widened.

Despite this fact, we must continue to explore ways of dealing with gridlocked traffic during the season. This problem has been explored and studied for years by the county. We also must deal with severe parking problems, thanks to county public beaches and their 30-plus public accesses. We have antiquated zoning and limited dollars with which to solve problems that have countywide implications.

Attempting to redevelop its down-

town, the town wants to save significant historical and archeological property and so must deal with the pull and tug of escalating property values, redevelopment pressures, and a desire to preserve open space and ecologically significant land. We are striving to develop stringent but fair regulations on personal watercraft, parasail, noise, towing, signs, building heights, commercial zoning, and accessory apartments. All of the aforementioned issues have had to be dealt with in the first year of existence.

Various problems that we face are described here only to offer evidence of the complexities we are facing voluntarily, so that detractors cannot argue that "Government Lite works only where nothing much is going on." The approach seeks to allow for hands-on participation in almost all phases of local government, within the philosophy of a simple, thin, and elegant government structure. The government does not grow, and government funds are targeted for delivery of services and capital projects.

Fort Myers Beach relies on (1) a volunteer local planning agency that is using teams of volunteers to assist in the state-mandated comprehensive planning process; (2) an unpaid town council that uses voice mail, e-mail, the Internet, and regularly held meetings to stay in close contact with residents; and (3) a pool of volunteers who tackle a variety of government functions, from the remodeling of town hall to volunteers' copying and distributing agendas for council and planning agency meetings on a scheduled basis.

Spin-Offs

The spin-off phenomenon mentioned at the opening of this article also has worked well. For instance, the town now has a pool group (the Build-a-Pool Foundation), which is taking responsibility for operating and maintaining a new community swimming pool that will be built. The town will not add any employees or costs to its budget in this

regard. Instead, this new group, made up of individuals particularly interested in and concerned about a community pool, will direct the future of the project.

Similarly, the town won a \$1 million grant to purchase a historic and archaeological site that would have been developed into a small subdivision without the town's formation. This site will be run by the town's historical society as a learning center. Again, Fort Myers Beach will not add to its budget for the downtown and has won a Florida MainStreet grant in a joint venture with the chamber of commerce. The employee dedicated to the MainStreet project will work for the chamber until a downtown redevelopment authority has been formed.

The initial downside of these spin-offs will be that each project will duplicate some internal functions, such as budget, personnel, purchasing, and so forth, but the trade-off in preventing bureaucratic bloat will be significant. There is an abundance of such positives, as the more spin-offs that you do, the more people in the community can become involved; every spin-off that is created enlarges the town's networking capability and allows for the dispersal of information and the ability to "rally the troops" quickly; and each spin-off stays focused on its own particular mission, with the local government moving among the spin-off projects disseminating information and offering coordination as a kind of big-picture cheerleader.

Also, town staff continue to explore shared efficiencies among the spin-offs and the government and looks to create new spin-offs as new projects are discussed by the community.

First-Year Accomplishments

The first year of Government Lite has accomplished more than anyone anticipated. The town's first budget reduced the "millage rate" being paid by the residents before the town's creation. In other words, the citizens saved money by becoming a town and, as an added

bonus, also took local control of issues and of the future.

The town applied for two major grants and has received both of them. The first grant was secured to purchase one of the most significant historic and archaeological sites in Florida, while the second grant is assisting in downtown redevelopment. Neither would have inured to the island without the town's incorporation.

Fort Myers Beach also was able to capture state revenues that would have flowed to the county with no guarantee that they would have been spent on the island. It is significant to note that these are all dollars that now will be spent within the corporate limits of the town. In the past, the residents of Estero Island, because of their ownership of valuable beach property, have felt that the county has treated the area as a "cash cow," collecting substantial property taxes yet spending and returning little to the community.

This is a common complaint on the federal, state, and local levels. Using Government Lite, the town's administrative costs have been budgeted at \$283,950, which is less than 10 percent of the total budget. The remaining dollars in this budget are being used to provide and deliver town services that are not provided by the county.

In a real, private sector sense, the residents of Fort Myers Beach have made significant dollars by incorporating and using the new philosophy. This fact has been particularly important in combating the public's feelings of alienation. Typically, people believe that even if their government saves money or makes money, those dollars will just be absorbed by government bloat, covered up within a huge bureaucracy, or wasted on the proverbial million-dollar screwdriver. Our government, however, will not grow or bloat.

Simplicity is used in budget materials, so that every expenditure or revenue is clearly detailed and explained. The budget document is concise and clear. Government Lite does not allow a gov-

ernment structure to turn inward and spend its time on administrative function. By means of structure and budget direction, governance is directed outward toward problem solving and service delivery.

Finding Our Identity

Before Estero Island became a town, its residents had a tremendous problem finding our communal identity. The island was split in its vision of itself. Citizens were not sure if what they had was a tourist destination or a family neighborhood, whether it was withering or growing. If Government Lite can work here, in an area that has had trouble defining its identity for so long, it can be reproduced almost anywhere.

The new identity will likely be met with a healthy dose of skepticism that can be overcome only by a real effort on the part of the participants to listen and learn from each other. Besides helping the community to work toward defining its identity constructively, the real crowning achievement has been the revived spirit of enthusiasm, trust, and support being shown by most residents toward each other and their elected leaders.

In a place with a long history of deep-set differences of opinion and perspective, after a long and bitter fight over whether or not to incorporate, and with the subsequently elected council split between those who voted in favor of incorporation and those who voted against, the expressions of optimism and good will that have all been documented in local newspapers are the most remarkable signs of success. **PNM**

Marsha Segal-George is town manager of Fort Myers Beach, Florida.