

## Schools, politics subject of double-header presentation

**By Mark Pettus**

*Ponte Vedra Recorder.com*

If two heads are better than one, are two government heads also better?

Apparently the St. Johns County Civic Association Roundtable thinks so. Earlier this week it hosted both the chairman of the county's board of commissioners, Commissioner Tom Manuel, and the head of the St. Johns County School District, Superintendent Joseph Joyner.

The two appeared together to talk about the funding shortfall facing county schools this year, and to discuss ways the county and the School District could work together to meet the shortfall.

Joyner's presentation dominated the meeting and he began by sharing his disappointment with property tax cuts passed earlier this year that were supposed to leave school funding untouched.

"We have an outstanding school district and I see it being dismantled," Joyner said of the effects of the cuts. 62 percent of school funding, he said, comes from required local effort — unfunded mandates. One percent from the lottery, 20 percent from state funding mandated for specific uses, and another nine percent from funding aimed at mandates from the Florida Education Finance Program.

Only eight percent of local funding — and less than one percent of state funding — can be used for discretionary spending, he added.



PHOTOS BY MARK PETTUS

St. Johns County Superintendent of Schools Joseph Joyner spoke before the St. Johns County Civic Association Roundtable this week, and told the group several proposed amendments on the November ballot would be bad for area schools.

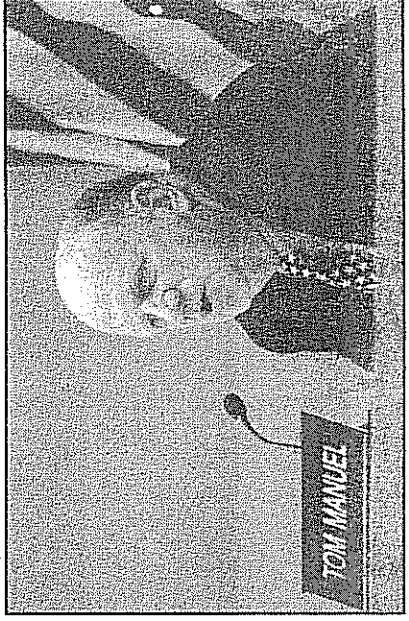
Joyner argued the state is providing less funding at the same time it is issuing more unfunded mandates. During the 1998-1999 school year, he said, local funding accounted for only 39 percent of school dollars. By 2008-2009, that number had grown to 51 percent.

"The state is pulling out [of school funding]," he said.

This year the School District faced its first budget reduction in 37 years. Joyner said the decline in property taxes combined with a two percent hold-back requested by Governor Charlie Crist to help combat further cuts expected next year, cost the district \$15 million and 200 employees — 122 instructional employees and 78 support staff members.

"That means less adults to deal with children," he said, "[which] creates a less-safe environment."

Joyner argued against three proposed constitutional amendments — 5, 7 and 9 — that could further impact



St. Johns County Commission Chairman Tom Manuel told the St. Johns County Civic Association Roundtable that charter government would give the county more flexibility for raising funds to support schools.

Florida schools if passed.

"The math doesn't add up," he said of Amendment 5, which would swap property taxes for a one-cent sales tax to fund schools. "... Unless you're going to tax medicine and groceries," Joyner said the swap could lead to a \$4 billion - \$5 billion funding deficit for schools.

He said Amendment 7 supports providing vouchers for private schools without requiring those schools to be held accountable to the same testing standards as public schools.

"They don't have to take the FCAT - or any cat," he said.

Then Joyner called Amendment 9 the "biggest deception I've ever seen" for requiring Florida schools to spend at least 65 percent of funding inside the classroom.

Florida's schools currently average spending more than 80 percent on students and St. Johns County spends more than most, he said, adding that even Dixie County, the county with the lowest percentage spent

in-classroom, spends more than 72 percent.

Manuel touted the county's cooperation with the School District and said the county planned to emulate the district's cost-cutting efforts through rebidding for contracted services.

"I believe [there is] \$3 million to \$5 million the county can save through re-bids," he said.

School funding receives the largest share of the county's property taxes — 53 percent, according to Manuel.

"I believe the number one driver of residential real estate values is the perception of the quality of our schools," Manuel said, citing as an example the price per square foot of homes in Julington Creek and nearby Mandarin, which is in the Duval County School District. "If you want to lose money, decrease the perception of that quality."

Manuel also used the meeting to promote a political agenda.

"We need local flexibility for local solutions. General law government does not permit the county to have that flexibility," he said.

Manuel told the Roundtable members that charter government provides the flexibility necessary to help the school district deal with financial shortfalls.

A proposal that would change St. Johns County's form of government from general law to a charter is on the Aug. 26 Primary Election ballot.

[mpettus@tcgroup.com](mailto:mpettus@tcgroup.com)  
904.285.8831 ext.16