

We're #47
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We're # 47

By Ron Cunningham, Gainesville Sun

Memo to Gov. Charlie Crist and the gang in the Florida Legislature: Here's a little secret: But you're going to want to keep it to yourselves. We ain't New Jersey. Or New York. Or Connecticut or Maryland. We're Florida. What's the difference?

More than just funny accents, beastly weather and smokestacks.

New Jersey is #1.

New York is #2.

Connecticut is #3.

Maryland is #4.

And Florida is #47.

And we're not talking about football rankings here. We're talking tax burden.

Every year, the Tax Foundation, a non-profit, non-partisan research group, measures the relative state-local tax burden on Americans. It's a pretty straightforward calculation, based on data from the Census Bureau and numerous other sources, of just how deeply state and local governments have their hands in the pockets of their citizens.

New Jersey's hands dig deepest. State and local taxes there consume 11.8 percent of the income of its residents.

New York comes in second, with 11.7 percent. Connecticut claims 11.1 percent, and Maryland 10.8 percent. The U.S. average is 9.7 percent.

Florida's state and local tax burden amounts to 7.4 percent of residents' income. Only three states take less: Wyoming (7 percent), Nevada (6.6 percent) and Alaska (6.4 percent). No doubt, this is why Sarah Palin got the veep nod from John McCain instead of Charlie. Her state has won the race to the bottom of the tax heap hands down. Of course, practically nobody lives in Alaska, so they don't need a lot of bothersome government.

Florida ranks 15th in the nation in per capita income, at \$46,293. The average Sunshine State resident pays \$2,384 a year in taxes to various governments in Florida. So what's my point? I'm not suggesting that Florida ought to strive to match Jersey and New York in tax burden. Far from it. But let's at least acknowledge the obvious. Florida is a low tax state. It has always been a low tax state. We don't have a state income tax. Our sales tax law is riddled with special interest exemptions. And believe it or not, our property taxes are not the highest in America. Furthermore, Florida manages to "export" a lot of its tax burden, thanks to tourism.

For the last three decades, Florida's state-local tax burden has never been higher than 8.6 percent (in 1995). And it is lower this year than it was in 1977. Indeed, according to the foundation "Tax burdens are down from 2007 to 2008 ... The largest drops were in Florida,

Utah and the District of Columbia, where the taxpayers' burden dropped by 0.5 percentage points between 2007 and 2008."

And yet to hear the rhetoric that regularly spouts from Gov. Crist and state legislators, Floridians are being crushed under the burden of state and local taxes. Cities and counties are sucking the lifeblood out of their residents. Compared to where? Wyoming? Crist used the rhetoric to win passage last year of Amendment 1, which cut our property taxes. And there's a pretty good chance that he'll use it again to get behind a future initiative to slash our school taxes. And we Floridians will love him for it because we hate being crushed under the weight of taxation. We want to be like Alaska, where they pay just \$1,433 per capita to support in-state governments. But let's not kid ourselves.

There is a price to be paid for winning the race to the bottom of the tax heap. We are a low tax state with a third rate education system and a shameful high school drop out rate. Our state universities have the highest student-faculty ratios in America. We have congested and poorly maintained roads. Our social services can't quite manage to care for the neediest and the disabled. Our child welfare system is notorious for losing track of neglected kids. Our criminal justice system is bursting at the seams. And when Floridians lose their jobs, their "safety net" consists of one of the lowest unemployment compensation checks in America. And it's getting worse.

Lawmakers keep trying to patch up billion-dollar holes in the state budget by using "rainy day" reserves and raiding trust funds. But the hole keeps getting larger and larger. If Floridians are leaving in droves for more promising destinations, and they are, it's not because they're looking for lower taxes. They are looking for better schools and better jobs and a better quality of life.

A better future, in other words. In states that are willing to invest in their people and in their physical and intellectual infrastructure. Crist and the rest of our political leaders have no vision for Florida's future beyond cutting taxes and cutting spending and cutting services and hoping that, somehow, things will get better as a result. It's a fool's vision of paradise, but it plays well on the campaign trail.

Watch out Wyoming. Watch out Alaska. We're coming after you. We won't rest until Florida is #50.

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