

OUR VIEW North Port needs to be able to borrow

There are very few of us who can say they've gone through life without needing to borrow some money. Perhaps it was to go to college. Maybe you needed some dough to buy your first home. Perhaps your car broke down and you didn't have enough money to fix it. Borrowing more than you can pay back is never a good idea. All we have to do is look at our national debt and cringe at the potential consequences. But, it's unrealistic that we can all go through life, marriage, child rearing and all the expenses that entails without needing some extra cash.

So, imagine if you are a city commission member or the city manager of a municipality that is growing like gangbusters. You can't keep up with the need for more and wider roads. You need more police, firefighters, and EMS units. You have a huge water project that needs to be done but the tax revenue just won't cover it. What do you do? Borrow money? Well, almost every city and county in Florida that we know of can do that. And they all have. Even with generous reserve funds, the most affluent government entities have to borrow money now and then.

All but North Port. Through some short-sightedness, the city charter never allowed for borrowing money. Somehow the city has managed to get by — until now. The rapid growth has caught up with the decision to never borrow money. That why, on Nov. 5, voters will be asked to approve a referendum to allow the city to borrow — with several stipulations to keep debt in check. Approval of the referendum would allow the city to borrow money without voter approval in response to a declared emergency or for safety and public health projects of \$15 million or less. And, if approved by voters, any borrowing would still need to be approved by a majority of the City Commission in at least two public hearings.

North Port is feeling the pinch. There is more than \$1.8 billion in infrastructure work needed that is of yet unfunded, even though the work is part of its 10- to 15-year capital improvement plan. Needs include, according to a column by North Port City Manager Jerome Fletcher:

- Roads and bridges that need to be maintained, upgraded and expanded to keep traffic moving and provide safe and reliable evacuation routes.
- Dozens of aging water control structures that need to be replaced in order to prevent flooding and help keep stormwater flowing safely across the city in the rainy season and during storm events.
- New public safety facilities, ambulances and fire trucks necessary to provide adequate service across our 104 square miles.
- Clean, safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater services that conform with federal health, safety and environmental standards for both current and future residents.
- A transfer station to help efficiently manage garbage, keep Solid Waste assessments steady for homeowners and keep the city clean and free of debris.

A new police headquarters isn't even on this list but is much needed. We would ask North Port voters to put some faith in their elected officials to make wise choices on when and how much to borrow and approve this referendum on Nov. 5 We believe there are safeguards in place — including public meetings — that will protect the citizens of North Port from being over their heads in debt. Rather it will assure citizens that their city can grow and meet their needs on a timely basis.