

2000/2001 Budget Address

Chairman Mel Martinez

**Budget Address FY 99-00 / 00-01
July 7, 1999**

Good afternoon... County Commissioners, honored guests, and friends.

I am here to present to you the budget for Orange County Government for the next two years.

It is a budget that is prudent but compassionate, thoughtful, but not timid, visionary, yet realistic. It captures the message I have heard from the people of Orange County and meets the promises I have made to them.

You have told me: "Give us a government that understands its role. That taxes fairly, runs efficiently and returns a good value for what we pay. Take care of the basics first, and help us maintain our quality of life."

This budget cuts taxes and reduces government spending, while it also reinvests in our future by focusing on public safety and building our infrastructure.

- Neighborhoods will be cleaned up and zoning complaints followed up more quickly.
- After school programs will triple in number.
- Nine million dollars in environmental land will be purchased over the next four years and 10 new parks will be built.

Through this budget we are building a foundation that will prepare us to meet the challenges of the next century.

The overall fiscal health of our government is strong -- due in large part to the thriving local economy. Unemployment is at a record low ... Property values are on the rise and are estimated to grow countywide by nearly 7% this year. The property value growth in unincorporated Orange County is estimated at nearly 8%, and we are experiencing growth in sales tax and the public service tax. For some, this news might be a green light to go on a spending spree. But that was not my mandate, and that is not the approach we are taking. We will not continue to develop an appetite for budgetary growth during these good times that cannot be sustained during leaner times. For this reason, I asked all departments to take a hard look at their proposed budgets and reduce operating expenses where possible.

I am pleased to say that we have identified \$5 million in savings over two years, and cut 35 general government positions. We have stopped the steady growth rate of our operating budgets dead in its tracks... And have made real reductions for each of the next two years.

Our Health and Family Services Department has been particularly successful in reducing their budget while actually delivering a higher level of service. We have found other ways to economize such as combining the laboratories of the Environmental Protection Division and the Utilities Water Division. These two agencies will share the same laboratory, resulting in savings of approximately \$500,000 to the citizens of Orange County.

This is the kind of flexible and creative thinking that must be a part of how our government will operate in the future. It allows us to meet the tough standards of efficiency and accountability that our citizens expect and deserve.

Because of these and other cost reduction efforts, I am able to present a budget that reduces property tax rates. This is the first reduction in Orange County's millage since 1987 and will cut \$8.8 million over the next two years.

Efficiency and tax fairness are important. But one of the top priorities of my administration is to have the safest urban county in America, and we have dedicated a major portion of our budget to accomplish that goal.

I have worked closely with the Sheriffs Office, Corrections, Fire Rescue, Courts and other agencies to provide strategic direction to improve the safety of our community. The fight for a safe community must take a multi-faceted approach.

I have been amazed at the spiraling growth in inmate population at our Corrections facilities. Last year, our average daily population was approximately 3,400. Today we have 4,300 inmates, and projections indicate we will have more than 4,700 by next year. Our current facilities are only designed to hold 3,300 inmates.

In order to deal with this rapidly expanding population in the short-term, the department is proposing to expand the number of jail beds in existing facilities on a temporary basis. We're also going to lease additional bed space from other jurisdictions, and plans are under review to convert on-site warehouse space into an inmate housing facility. Additional staff has been proposed in this multi-year budget to manage the additional beds and new facility.

Plans are being finalized to construct a new central intake and housing facility. This facility will be used as an entry point for arrests and will house up to 1600 inmates. Current construction estimates for this facility range as high as \$120 million. We are working hard at streamlining our plans, and hope to cut that number significantly before bringing a proposal to the commission for approval.

While a new jail may, indeed, be somewhere in our future, we are taking steps now to make sure our current jail is as secure as possible by adding 161 new correctional officers.

There are many factors that contribute to crime; the "broken window syndrome" is well documented. Neighborhoods that are not well taken care of have a higher incidence of crime. And blighted commercial areas create eyesores that simply cannot be tolerated. To ensure we maintain the integrity and visual appeal of our community, we will be pursuing a vigorous expansion of our code enforcement program during the next fiscal year.

In order to place emphasis on effective code enforcement and to increase operational efficiencies, a new Code Enforcement Division is being created. Staff members currently performing code enforcement functions in Zoning and Environmental Protection are being reassigned to this new division. In addition, we will add new code enforcement inspectors -- increasing their number by more than 50% over 2 years. This new division will significantly increase the number of code enforcement inspections, reduce the length of time it takes to bring violations into compliance, and visibly improve the physical appearance and quality of life in our neighborhoods. These improvements will reduce crime, protect and increase property values, and encourage new growth and development in our established older neighborhoods. Fire safety is also emphasized in our budget. We are spending \$5.8 million to upgrade fire equipment, hiring 68 new fire fighters and building three new fire stations. The Fire Rescue Department is partnering with cities to provide the most effective and cost efficient fire and emergency protection services available.

To compliment this initiative the Fire Department is implementing a computer aided dispatch system that provides faster and better information to firefighters and medical personnel.

In addition to the three new stations we are building, we are acquiring land for three future stations over the next two years to provide greater coverage to areas experiencing rapid growth. Two of the new stations will be located in the Ocoee area and one is located on International Drive. Land is being acquired in east and west Orange County to meet future growth.

I have spoken to you about the nuts and bolts of our basic services. But now let me speak from the heart...

I am very concerned, as I know you are, about the welfare of our youth in our community, we must find a way to give our children opportunities to succeed. Our middle school after school program is an example of what Orange County can do to help.

Last spring I visited Discovery Middle School to see first hand our after school program. While there, I had the opportunity to speak with the students and I was struck by the comments from one of them: she said, "If I wasn't here, I would be home alone watching TV." This same comment was repeated time and again by other students.

The principal and administrators shared their student's enthusiasm and positive feelings for this program. These feelings were recently confirmed. A study by Orange County Public Schools shows that

overall the pilot program schools had noticeable improvements in grades, discipline and attendance. This is a homerun in anyone's book!

Because of this spectacular success, the "pilot program" is over!! I am proposing in this budget an increase in our funding for middle school programs by over 200% ... Expanding them to a total of 18 middle schools throughout Orange County.

I am also pleased to announce a partnership with Orange County Public Schools that will save the county \$900,000.

The children at Great Oaks Village have traditionally gone to school on campus in facilities in desperate need of repair. Instead of building a new facility, these children will be mainstreamed into existing schools near Great Oaks Village.

This is a good financial decision, but it is rooted in my deep concern for what is best for these children. And this concern extends to developing a sensible approach to managing the growth in our community so that our children will have a livable community when they are adults.

I am committed to preserving our natural environment; and our budget will allow us to acquire more environmentally sensitive lands. County staff will be exploring grant and partnering opportunities that will allow for a variety of educational and recreational activities on newly acquired lands.

We are also planning to increase access and improve maintenance on those lands already owned by the county. We will demonstrate that nature, education and recreation can co-exist... provided care and thought is given throughout the planning and design process.

This new direction falls directly in line with governor Bush's Florida Forever Program, a successor to the P2000 program, which recognizes and promotes the compatible uses of land for both recreation and protection of the wildlife and natural resources.

Recreational opportunities in our parks will be increased significantly because of this budget. We will dedicate over \$21 million dollars for the construction of 10 new parks. In addition, 11 current parks will receive improvements. And, yes commissioners -- each of your districts will benefit from this new construction.

We are also embarking on a ten-year, \$620 million transportation program that will provide: 300 miles of road improvements and 250 miles of road paving.

But this only begins to address the transportation needs this county faces, so we must actively pursue public and private partnerships to leverage our resources for future projects and improvements. The shortfall in transportation funding is a difficult issue, and we will be looking for solutions to that problem in the months to come.

As Orange County continues to grow and demand for government services escalate, we are faced with increasing demands for facility space. We are taking an economical approach by moving out of expensive, leased, "Class A" office space where possible, and moving into county owned space.

Funding is included in this multi-year budget for the build-out of several floors in the county courthouse, reducing the need for the county to lease or buy additional office space. We must be certain that we are effectively utilizing our current space, which will have the added benefit of creating a more efficient work force by reducing the number of work locations housing county staff.

Many other initiatives that are being funded, contribute to the overall success of the county and provide enjoyment for the community. One such project is the Regional History Center, which is well on its way to being completed by the fall of 2000. The history center is designed to give us an insightful look at ourselves, how we got here and how we function as a community.

As I present to you my first budget as Orange County Chairman, I want to acknowledge the tough choices that had to be made and will continue to be made as the process continues. Not all funding requests can be met. And, as we move forward, we must maintain a clear vision of what is the proper role of local government.

I thank the commissioners for their input in the budget process. We have attempted to meet most of your requests, and look forward to continuing to work with you as we establish a budget that builds a foundation for our future, rooted in strong fiscal management and a commitment to investment in our community.

We are doing this by enhancing public safety, providing for the needs of our families and children, improving roads, and providing more parks and green spaces throughout the county. With the investments we are making today, we will be paving the way for future generations... Our children and their children ... to have a quality of life that is second to none.

Please know that we have many challenges ahead of us. This afternoon, I have outlined some of them... Like funding transportation needs to relieve traffic congestion on our roads; dealing with the growing population at our jail; and effectively dealing with other public safety issues.

I believe it is critical that we work together with citizens, neighboring counties, municipalities, the state and federal governments, the business community, and all other key stakeholders to leverage our efforts and resources.

Together we can meet these challenges and together we will!

As I submit this multi-year budget, I am very proud and enthusiastic about the opportunities that lie ahead for each of us to have a real and lasting impact on this great community.

Thank you.