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Let voters review childrens' councils now and then

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The Children's Services Councils in Broward and Palm Beach counties plan to ask voters a crucial question in November: Should taxpayers fund these agencies in perpetuity?

Together, these councils collect \$175 million every year in property taxes and award the money to a number of nonprofits that work with disadvantaged children.

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By all accounts, the councils do a great job of ensuring our money is spent on valuable programs for struggling children and moms — services that need to continue.

But experience elsewhere suggests a periodic public review — an amplified public accounting — is a good thing for such unelected taxing authorities.

Current state law requires children's services councils to seek voter reauthorization every 12 years, but allows counties to ask voters to change that timeframe — or eliminate periodic reauthorization altogether.

In facing their first reauthorization vote under the law, both the Broward and Palm Beach councils are pushing to eliminate periodic voter review.

Unfortunately, Palm Beach county commissioners already have acquiesced, approving a November ballot question that asks voters to reauthorize the council and let it tax homes and businesses in perpetuity. While we believe reauthorization deserves to be granted, commissioners went too far in approving language that would allow the council to forego a periodic voter look-see.

In Broward, county commissioners are considering similar ballot language proposed by the Children's Services Council. Commissioners should send the proposal back to the council's board and request it to submit ballot language that welcomes a public reauthorization vote at least every 10 years or so.

While children's councils do good work, these taxing authorities mostly fly under the public's radar. And absent a periodic public spotlight, problems can arise, including bloated staffs, outsized salaries, no-bid contracts and a propensity to spend tax dollars on property rather than services.

In 2010, state lawmakers passed a law that requires children's councils to make their case to voters every 12 years, starting in 2014 for some. Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, led the charge after learning that Martin County's children's council planned to build a \$4-million headquarters. He called it a major waste since the agency doesn't actually provide services, but simply awards public money to others to do so.

Meanwhile, in Hillsborough County, that council's executive director was ousted in 2012 following news reports about myriad financial and leadership problems, including questionable expenditures and millions of dollars spent on no-bid contracts.

Because of problems elsewhere, we've learned that executive salaries at some of these councils can top \$200,000 and that staffs can exceed 100, even though they provide no direct services to children, but fund others that do so.

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The councils' leaders argue that they are audited every year, so they are held publicly accountable. And they say it costs money to fund reauthorization campaigns, something they must legally rely on friends to lead.

Given the good work they fund, children's councils should be able to make an easy case for voter reauthorization. Indeed, leading up to such votes, the councils amp up public education, always a good thing.

In Broward last year, the council helped find a spot in after-school and summer programs for more than 9,000 disadvantaged children. It also delivered subsidized child care for 1,230 children from working-poor families. And it diverted 2,600 families at risk for child abuse to family-strengthening programs.

In Palm Beach, council efforts helped get prenatal care to more moms and reduce the infant mortality rate by 6.3 percent since 2006, fund child care for more than 10,000 kids, and provide after-school and summer programs for 9,000 children.

Given their good work, it's hard to believe voters will take money away from kids.

But given the tax dollars they collect, it's not too much to ask that children's services councils be held accountable to their benefactors — the voters — every now and then.

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