

Earlier this summer, I met with the leaders of all the unions in the county to tell them about our budget shortfall for 2003 and our challenges for 2004. Later, I again met to tell them about our plans for a series of reduced hour workweeks that would help balance the 2003 shortfall. At this meeting, union heads told me that they viewed it as an attack on seniority and that they would block it in court – thus limiting the amount of savings. I gave them a document that showed that my alternative was to lay off some 300 workers and they said that they preferred the layoffs in September. The document also showed the other actions we are taking to reduce the budget shortfall.

Now it is mid-September and the layoffs have come. In addition, every one of our non-union employees will have to work four 35-hour workweeks between now and the end of the year. These non-union employees will forgo pay raises for the second year in a row and many of them will see their management positions gone in the 2004 budget.

The reality is that the pension payments and sick leave benefits approved back in November of 2000 by Tom Ament and the County Board are a financial albatross around the neck of this budget. Thankfully, a number of union leaders now understand this fiscal reality and are offering to reopen their contracts. It is my hope that we can reach an agreement soon that will both balance our budget and bring back workers in key positions for the good of the county.