

Our son Peter taught his family a valuable lesson this week. A tenth grader, he was given an English assignment that asked him to explore Thoreau's classic *Civil Disobedience*, with a focus on the topic of non-conformity. Approaching it with his usual diligence he decided "the project as proposed was incongruent and incompatible." To honor Thoreau's plea to non-conformity he embarked upon an experiment of civil disobedience by drafting a conscientious objection in keeping with Thoreau's principles.

When his father and I asked if he was willing to receive an "F" on the assignment, Peter said the consequences were potentially negative but "...well worth the risk." We sent him off with our blessings and crossed our fingers. While his teacher did not agree to the approach, this honor student stayed his ground and only by the intercession of the English Department Chair was a compromise solution found. Mom and Dad stayed out of the picture, allowing Peter the opportunity to act on his deeply held principles. Discussions ensued at home that stressed that in the compromise was the victory.

In the end, Peter wrote, "that this process—this experimentation—was a telling process ... a successful one ... it was certainly not the expected path of the assignment, but it accomplished the same goal ..." It goes without saying this activist-turned-Commissioner mom was proud.

Rewind to September, as I sought to give these tired brain cells a rest after a tough city budget session. Little did I imagine that my son's English assignment would provide me with the inspiration to refocus myself on what work lay ahead for the coming city year. Courage, a willingness to think out of the box, and the ability to compromise: good lessons for everyone and in particular for this commissioner, and much needed qualities for a city at a crossroads.

Coral Gables faces a tough financial year ahead, a rebuilding year where we must watch our spending and prioritize. Our reserves are low, so our resolve must be high to make sure that we focus on the essentials. Replacing aging sewer lines is not a sexy proposition and certainly not as pretty as the rambla proposed by the charrette, the museum, or the romantic trolley that harkens back to simpler times. Beautiful, worthwhile projects no doubt. But in

tough economic times with a "burger budget" will we have the courage to wait, to properly plan and to fund these projects with alternative sources that do not exclusively use taxpayer monies? Funding that plans not just for one year, but for many years of use and enjoyment?

Being the "1" in the 4 - 1 vote on the budget, I am aware of what that feels like. My goal for next September's hearings is that it be 5 - 0 vote. And in keeping with my promise to work the budget as a year-round issue, I have met with our City Manager to discuss goals and expectations and to learn more. In order for Coral Gables to thrive again financially and to grow properly, it must learn to think out of the box to make the necessary adjustments.

Is the "It's always been done this way, so let's leave it alone" mindset still valid or is it time to rethink thoughtfully how we do government? Can we find ways to lower our upwardly spiraling fixed costs, overtime hours and expensive perks? Can the money saved, fund needed projects and replenish our cash reserves? Will city management have the courage to propose needed policy changes and will we on the Commission listen and act accordingly?

Just recently we were faced with the Solomon-like decision of deciding whether to allow a family to build on a piece of land they had rightfully purchased and put through our imperfect, yet legal city process that determines the splitting of lots. Though our initial 3-2 vote did not favor the landowners, the reconsideration of the decision at our October 29 meeting may yield a different course, a compromise perhaps?

Can process and rules designed to preserve our residential areas from over development be balanced by the human component of the innocent land buyer that hoped to build his dream home? Is the spirit of the law more important than the letter of the law?

Courage, out-of-the box thinking and compromise are great qualities for 15-year olds and Commissioners. Thank you Peter for the unexpected lesson!