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Superintendent Fiorentino should step up to the plate

C.T. Bowen, Times editorial staff

There is a Louisville Slugger baseball bat sitting in the office of the Pasco school superintendent. The handle is adorned in pink, and it is personalized with the name of its owner - Heather Fiorentino.

You have to wonder if it has been swung a few times over the past several days. Bat meets ball and begets winning hit. That would be the storybook ending, anyway.

In Hollywood, a baseball bat becomes an accoutrement to inspiring legal strategy in *A Few Good Men*. It reconnects father and son in *Field of Dreams*. And in *The Untouchables*, Robert DeNiro, portraying gangster Al Capone, wields a baseball bat as a weapon right after touting the virtues of being a team player to his tuxedo-clad colleagues.

"I get nowhere unless the team wins," DeNiro says.

Whack!

Over the past several days, the school team did win, but the bat's owner did not. The district successfully fought an effort to curb its school construction dollars produced by home building via impact fees. Yet, there is little political afterglow for the superintendent.

Builders believe Fiorentino reneged on an agreement not to object to cutting the fee in half for 22 months. The building industry originally wanted to eliminate the \$4,800-per-home school fee entirely until 2013, but acquiesced to a less severe reduction after meeting with the superintendent.

Those conversations, however, failed to include School Board members, who weren't interested in a deal. The board refused to give in and Cynthia Armstrong, elected just five months earlier, became the face of rallying the public against the impact fee cut.

Armstrong led the sign-waving pickets. She authored the prose published in newspapers. She encouraged a large turnout at a commission town hall meeting Monday night and again at Tuesday's public hearing.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Jack Mariano, who had headed the parade to cut impact fees, folded. He, too, peevied builders. But, by doing so, he accepted accolades from delighted parents, teachers and students who feared reduced impact fees would exacerbate a \$60 million school budget shortfall.

And Ray Gadd, the former assistant superintendent terminated by Fiorentino two years ago, penned a letter to this newspaper citing the potential detriment to the Penny for Pasco sales tax if the impact fee cut had been implemented. During Tuesday's public hearing, speaker Pat Gorecki, a New Port Richey senior active in civic affairs, lauded Gadd's leadership.

Whack!

All of this poor political karma may have proved irrelevant for Fiorentino if not for the coincidental release of a consultant's report on the upper-level management of the school district.

The interviewers said Fiorentino's employees described her as a person of "strong will" who is willing to exercise that trait, verbally and frequently."

Translation: She is a stubborn and inflexible micro-manager who yells a lot at her subordinates. The report also said employees believe she stifles innovation and creativity. School principals said their input is sought but ignored.

Likewise, the report said there is a poor working relationship between the board and superintendent, all of whom answer to voters. Certainly, the initial discussions on cutting the impact fee illustrate this.

There is no denying morale among the school district's 9,700 employees is in the tank. There have been no raises for three years. The governor and Legislature want to cut their pension benefits while changing how teachers are evaluated and compensated. Some will be laid off in the coming months. The rest most likely will have a couple of unpaid furlough days - a salary cut - over the next year.

The district did not overspend. And contrary to Mariano's self-serving dialogue, the district did not delay spending cuts. It reduced its budget by \$44 million the past two years. School district revenues declined due to falling property values, a decision in Tallahassee to replace state money with federal stimulus dollars that are expiring, and voters' unwillingness to renew a small property tax for education.

The Tallahassee-based finances are beyond Fiorentino's control. Yet, the superintendent can control her own morale-damaging management.

"I am who I am," Fiorentino said in an interview Thursday. "Can I improve? Yes." She described herself as a strong leader, "But it doesn't mean that I don't listen. And it doesn't mean that I don't work with people."

Strong-willed and strong leader, however, are two different things.

A strong leader adapts. A strong leader leads.

The bat is in the superintendent's hands.

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