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The Way to go

OPINION

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EDITORIALS

Two tales of Florida tax reform

1. TAX COMMISSION: DON'T FORGET THESE GUYS

While the Legislature and governor flounder over tax reform in Tallahassee, a completely different and relatively obscure group meets today in Fort Myers as part of its series of hearings on, yes, tax reform.

If state leaders are unable to come up with substantial reform that will win legal and voter approval, it may fall to the Florida Taxation and Budget Reform Commission to do the job.

That's why people should attend this meeting, or submit written comments. Finally, this commission is beginning to draw the attention it deserves, especially as an alternative to the Legislature, or to a

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IF YOU GO

■ **What:** Public hearing of the Florida Tax & Budget Reform Committee
■ **Where:** Old Lee County Courthouse, 2120 Main St., downtown, Fort Myers
■ **When:** Today, 4-7 p.m.
■ **Information:** Call Kathy Torian at (850) 921-8905 or go to www.floridat.brc.org.

Our Homes amendment of 1992, which restricts the rate at which homestead property assessments for taxation can rise—and which is at the heart of the current uproar over property taxes.

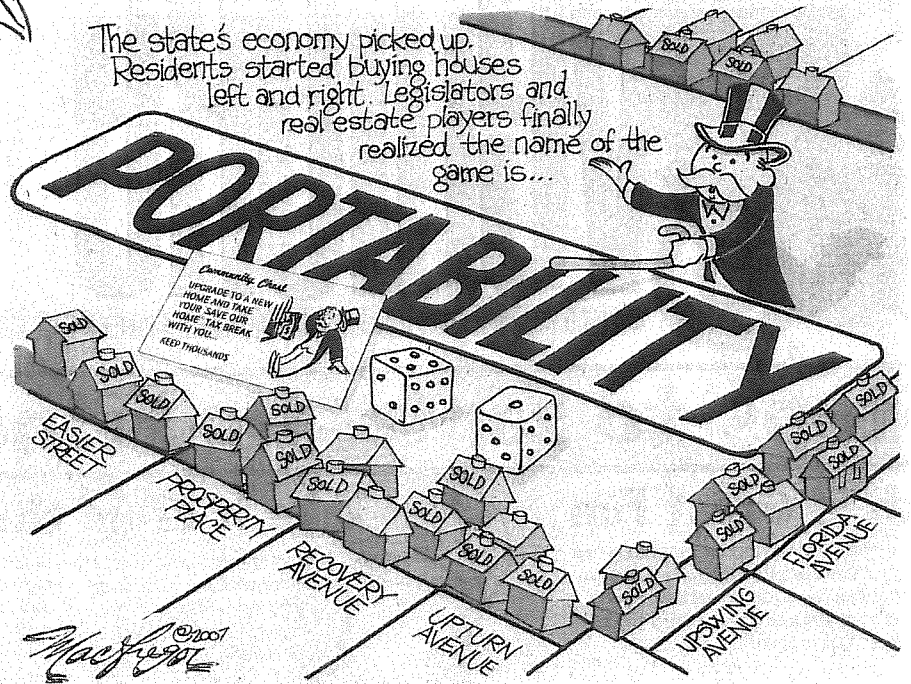
Chairman Allan Bense says the commission has met 55 times so far, hearing mostly from lobbyists. It's important for them to hear from you, too.

clumsy array of citizen tax initiatives that would make things far worse.

The commission, made up of 25 people appointed by the governor, the president of the Senate and the speaker of the House, meets every 20 years to look broadly at Florida's tax structure—which is precisely what the Legislature should be doing and is not.

The commission has the power to put constitutional amendments directly on the November 2008 ballot without going through the Legislature, or it can submit proposals to lawmakers. Maybe that former power will become very relevant if the bumbling continues in Tallahassee.

The commission has two members from Lee County, Circuit Court judge and former lawmaker and prosecutor Bruce Kyle and veteran county Property Appraiser Ken Wilkinson. Wilkinson is the property tax guru and father of the popular Save



2. LEGISLATURE: STILL MESSING UP

House Speaker Marco Rubio has finally given up trying to kill Save Our Homes.

That's progress. The speaker is learning that on this complex topic, he cannot be so rigid.

But the Legislature is still trying to do a rush job on tax reform in another special session this month, in time to get yet another proposed amendment on the January ballot.

That would be a mistake. It was haste that helped doom the first proposed amendment. It was rightly thrown off the ballot by a judge for being misleading, especially in the stealthy way it would have phased out Save Our Homes, the 1992 amendment that limits increases in valuations for taxes on primary homes.

"In a time when people's taxes keep going up, it's very difficult to go to voters and convince them they should let go of a security blanket like Save Our Homes," Rubio told The Miami Herald Friday. "Now you can argue that it's bad policy for the state of Florida, that it's led to some of the problems, but the truth of the matter is, people like Save Our Homes."

For a smart guy, Rubio has certainly taken a long time to grasp something this obvious.

Rather than rush and stumble again after blowing it twice in legislative sessions this year, lawmakers need to take a deep breath.

Change is needed. Save Our Homes needs to be portable, so people aren't trapped in their homes by big tax increases if they move. Some SOH-type protections should be extended to businesses and second-home owners.

They should not be treated like cash cows by voters, who are largely insulated by SOH from the effects of huge increases in public spending.

Lawmakers must take the time to get this right, even if it means no January referendum.