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Levy County Legislative Delegation listens; *State senator lambastes two Florida supervisors of elections*



State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) (left) and State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) shake hands moments after Sen. Bradley enters the Dogan Cobb Municipal Building in Bronson on Monday (Dec. 3).

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Dec.5, 2018 at 1:18 p.m.

BRONSON – A series of sparky words from a freedom-defending American on Monday (Dec.3) ignited a bright fire of direct language from a Florida state senator who shared his opinion about allegedly poor quality of work shown by two Florida counties’ supervisors of elections in the recently-past midterm elections.



Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt speaks with Levy County Commissioner Matt Brooks before the start of the meeting.

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State Rep. Charlie Stone (left) speaks with constituent Barney Cannon before the start of the meeting.

State Sen. Robert “Rob” Bradley (R-Fleming Island, Dist. 5) and State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22) are the Legislative Delegation for Levy County.

Sen. Bradley, whose residence is in Clay County, is the state senator for all of Levy County, as well as Dixie, Gilchrist, Baker, Bradford, Clay, Columbia, Lafayette, Suwannee, Union and part of Marion. He is part of another 11 legislative delegations.

Rep. Stone is the state representative for all of Levy County and the western part of Marion County. He will be with Sen. Bradley at that get-together for that part of Marion County.

Rep. Stone called roll and found that both he and Sen. Bradley were present. Stone, who chaired the two-man delegation in Levy County this year, at the end of the meeting nominated Bradley to chair the delegation next year, and that passed by a 2-0 vote.

As is customary for the Legislative Delegation, the first people to be listed to speak are county and city elected officials.

However, during these sessions, sometimes the general public shares a dialogue that cuts to the marrow of what American government and freedom is all about. That was the case Monday.

From the members of the audience who addressed the state leaders this year was Renate Cannon.

An avid participant in local and regional government meetings, Cannon is known for her direct questions and relatively polite demeanor. While civilized, she is able to express her opinions with the strength that is proper to capture the thoughts.

She shared some insight about her life, too on Monday, so that listeners might understand her perspective in regard to the most recent statewide election

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embarrassment.

Cannon's mother had the courage to escape from East Germany, Cannon said, however that is where Cannon grew up. She knows about Communism, and fascist tyrants that were government leaders. And she has learned about American ideals for freedom and voting.

Cannon came to the United States of America on July 4, 1971, she said. Cannon is a naturalized citizen of this country, she said, as well as being a veteran of the United States military.

As a result of having escaped from a Communist country, Cannon said she may take the right to vote a bit more seriously than the average American citizen.

Demonstrating that she is also well-read and aware of current news, Cannon congratulated Sen. Bradley for his initiative to introduce a bill so that amendments to the Florida Constitution will be limited to single-issue ballot questions – rather than having two or more issues (which is known as “bundled”).

On Nov. 21, Bradley noted on a social media site “The bundling of several issues in one constitutional amendment is a terrible way to amend our Constitution. It’s unfair to voters who may approve of one issue in the amendment and disapprove of another. I just filed a bill to end bundling.”

The bill, Senate Joint Resolution 74, mandates all proposals to the Florida State Constitution “be limited to a single subject and matter directly connected to such subject.”

Renate Cannon speaks to the legislators about her concerns for the reputation of the state of Florida in the eyes of the world in regard to voting issues.

After bestowing her congratulations upon the senator for his commonsense legislation, Cannon asked the senator to introduce a bill “for realistic deadlines” for people who use mail-in ballots. She said they are no longer counted after a deadline is reached.

Cannon said she understands the 67 counties cover a broad expanse of different population quantities and that Levy County voters are blessed to have a well-experienced supervisor of elections, as well as a relatively small number of voters.

Hearing no promise to seek to revise deadlines for mail-in ballots, she moved on to a general question about who leads all 67 supervisors of elections and whether there is a means to save Florida residents from being tarnished by embarrassing actions in regard to elections.

Cannon said she remembers the nightmare in Florida from the election of the year 2000 – with “hanging chads” being a moniker that may live in the state’s history in infamy. If the midterm election shows the problems it did, the 2020 election causes her



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to “shudder to think” what that will bring.

As a result of the problems in 2000 and now in 2018, Florida has twice become “a laughing stock” in the nation, she said.

“I am tired of being a laughing stock,” Cannon said, “not (only) of the state, of the nation, but of the world.”

The Levy County voter asked her Legislative Delegation if there is a standard for supervisors of elections to follow statewide. Or is the quality of election supervision decided county-by-county?

Rep. Stone said the Florida Department of State has a Division of Elections, which oversees election in the state.

Cannon then said a study from the University of Florida stated that 10 percent of black voters in Florida cast ballots that are not counted.

“Gentlemen,” she said. “that is untenable. Please keep in mind that it wasn’t our doing that our color is white.”

Rep. Stone said that given the problems with elections in state races in Florida, that he foresees there will be a significant amount of discussion in the House and Senate.

There is policy that exists, Stone added, to assure every eligible vote is counted. He said the Canvassing Board in each county also has responsibilities that must be performed to assure a free and fair election.

Then Sen. Bradley began his response to Cannon’s questions.

“First of all,” Bradley said, “the people who received the most votes (in the midterm election) are serving in those offices (when those terms begin).”

Sen. Bradley said the issues in Broward County and Palm Beach County are not resultant from a shortage of money to buy the proper machines.

The problems are not from state leadership. The problems are not from the Republican Party, he said.

The problems resulted from two persons who Bradley said he believes are incompetent, but who were elected by voters to serve as supervisors of elections.

“They have elected supervisors (of election) who don’t do their job to the standards that we expect,” Sen. Bradley said. “And we need to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. The rules, as Rep. Stone said, the rules are uniform across 67 counties.

“But if you have somebody who isn’t doing the job correctly,” Bradley continued, “I mean enforcing those rules correctly, then that’s where you get problems.”

Sen Bradley said one supervisor of elections has been suspended.

Gov. Rick Scott issued an executive order suspending Broward County Supervisor of Elections Brenda Snipes from office for misfeasance, incompetence and neglect of duty, according to records.

Snipes submitted a letter of resignation to Scott with Jan. 4 as an effective date, according to records.

Snipes, a Republican, has been the top elections official in Broward County since 2003 when then-Gov. Jeb Bush appointed her, according to records, having been reelected by a majority of voters in that county.

As a result of the midterm elections issues, Gov. Scott appointed Enterprise Florida President and CEO Peter Antonacci to replace Snipes. Broward County voters will have a chance to elect a new supervisor in 2020.

“I hope they look very closely at the other one (Palm Beach County Supervisor of

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Elections Susan Bucher, a Democrat) as well,” Sen. Bradley said.

Bradley said the people of Florida need to challenge the voters in Palm Beach County and in Broward County to hold their supervisors of elections “... accountable for poor performance.”

Bradley said the voters of Florida decided when they cast their ballots on Amendment 10 in the midterm election to keep constitutional officers such as the supervisor of elections, the board of county commissioners, the sheriff, the clerk, the tax collector and the property appraiser as elected officials in each county.

The state government is constrained by the Florida Constitution as it should be, Bradley said. As a result, “there is not a top down elections system in Florida,” he said. “The voters have asked that we have 67 separate offices.”

Each supervisor of elections, he said, must abide by the same rules.

“Some will be better than others,” Bradley said. “And that’s the system we work in.”

OTHER ISSUES

The Legislative Delegation heard about statewide education concerns; issues with rural, poverty-stricken counties; a new concept for dental care and much more.

The hearing was again in the Dogan S. Cobb Municipal Building located at 660 E Hathaway Ave. (U.S. Alt. 27) in Bronson. Sen. Bradley and Rep. Stone thanked Bronson Town Clerk Shirley Miller for the town hosting the event again this year. Miller was standing in for Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee.

The Legislative Delegation for each of Florida’s 67 counties holds a public hearing each year to afford local officials, members of the public, and other interested parties the opportunity to present legislative proposals or express opinions on state issues.

The next Regular 60-day Session of the Florida Legislature will convene on March 5, 2019 in Tallahassee.

Since Sen. Bradley lives in Clay County and Rep. Stone lives in Marion County, Sen. Bradley has said he leans on Stone for a closer perspective on issues that affect the Levy County part of his district.

Both state leaders said they work closely together to assure Levy County is well-served in the Florida Senate and the Florida House of Representatives, and they both agreed that they work as a team with both sets of their legislative aides communicating well with each other.

When Rep. Stone addressed the audience, he said it is an honor and a pleasure to represent all of Levy County.

Stone is in his sixth year of service in the Florida House of Representatives. After the coming two-year term to which he was reelected on Nov. 6, though, Stone will have reached a point where he cannot be reelected – due to the term-limit provision in the Florida Constitution. His four, two-year terms as a member of the Florida House will be complete after this final two-year term.

The first people to speak to Levy County Legislative Delegation were other elected officials. What they said follows:

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Levy County Commissioner Matt Brooks (left) and Commission Chairman John Meeks stand before the state legislators to share their input with the state leaders.

LEVY COUNTY COMMISSION CHAIRMAN JOHN MEEKS

Levy County Commission Chairman John Meeks was joined by County Commissioner Matt Brooks at the podium to address Rep. Stone and Sen. Bradley this year.

One point that Meeks mentioned this year, as he has in past years, was for the state leaders to do what they can to provide more equality for rural residents in regard to Internet Service Provider options.

Like every other member of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners, and in every Constitutional Office of Levy County, Meeks and Brooks are Republicans. In American history, the Rural Electrification Administration came into being to help assure rural residents had safe and reliable electric service.

While all five Levy County public libraries are WiFi hot spots and there are some number of public computers, this is not enough for the students of Levy County to use for homework, according to what some county leaders believe. Verizon offers a MiFi service and some people can connect to the Internet via cable, but overall the level of service for Internet in Levy County is relatively abysmal in contrast with more urban counties like Alachua, Citrus and Marion, Chairman Meeks has said.

Meeks mentioned that good Internet service makes a difference for economic development and commerce as well as education.

Levy County and WMDs

Levy County is split between the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) and the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

Once again, the county is asking the state to change the boundaries of the two districts so that all of Levy County is in the Suwannee River Water Management District. Although the same request was made last year, and before, this year the county has worked with the water management districts to show the state why this is the best idea.

Katie Kelly of the SRWMD shared with the Legislative Delegation information from the district.

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Those talking points are noted below:

The District appreciates the Delegation support for the District's

- Operations (\$2,387,000),
- ERP Program (\$453,000),
- Land Management activities (\$1,777,210) and
- Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT - \$309,909)

PILT is a mechanism that is used to pay small counties that have a population of 150,000 or less for acquiring land that is taken off the tax rolls.

As the Legislature recognizes, PILT is extremely important to small counties. The amount of Levy County's PILT this year was \$30,401.84.

MAJOR SRWMD INITIATIVES:

The District has outlined its major initiative for the near future.

North Florida Regional Water Supply Initiative:

- In July, the Governing Board approved a regional water supply initiative to help foster projects that would assist in the creation of alternative water supplies.
- The District has partnered with the St. Johns River Water Management District to identify a list of projects that may have the potential to be funded.

Currently, the Department of Environmental Protection in conjunction with the Governor's Office has requested \$15 million for alternative water supply funding.

Kelly highlighted action resulting from the springs restoration funding, which the District received from the Legislature and governor over recent years.

Since 2013:

- 36 springs projects have been funded – totaling nearly \$60 million in projects.
- These restoration projects have saved an estimated 73 million gallons of water a day; and reduced nine million pounds of nutrient loadings annually

Upon the approval of the legislative budget commission, the SRWMD will have an additional six projects totaling nearly \$10 million.



LEVY COUNTY SCHOOLS

Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeffery R. "Jeff" Edison and Levy County School Board Chairman Chris Cowart (left) speak to the Levy County Legislative Delegation.

Levy County Superintendent of Schools Jeffery R. Edison

and Levy County School Board Chairman Chris Cowart shared their insight with the state leaders.

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The two men presented four requests from the Levy County School Board as its legislative platform for the year.

The first one is to replace Chiefland Middle High School. Superintendent of Schools Edison said. The county is in the process required to secure this, he said as he mentioned that there was a meeting between the county and the Florida Department of Education staff in this regard as recently as last week.

Edison responded in the affirmative when Sen. Bradley said CMHS is not on the list for this year. Edison said he and the School Board understand there is great need in this regard across the state.

A bill that the Levy County School Board would like to be sponsored is in regard to students who have special needs. They are not allowed during standardized testing to receive the same added care they receive during their regular classroom learning, Edison said.

For instance, Cowart said, a student who is dyslexic will be provided with a piece of paper that has pre-drawn boxes for an essay part of a test. In a standardized test, that student may lose a significant amount of time drawing such a box, when a non-dyslexic child would not lose that time.

Cowart said in a telephone interview Wednesday (Dec. 5) that the class accommodations given to a student during the year are what is being sought for the time of the test.

These accommodations to overcome a handicap would not skew the test results to show anything other than what is being tested, Coward said. This type of accommodation in a standardized test scenario would simply put the handicapped student on a level field with students who do not require accommodations.

The third plank of the platform presented by the Levy County School Board for the state leaders to consider is in relation to the Safe Schools action from the previous year.

The Levy County allocation for Safe Schools this year was \$525,000, Edison said, but the Levy County School Board spent \$793,000. Therefore, he added, Levy County had to use about \$265,000 this year from the General Fund.

On another budget matter within the same topic of Safe Schools, Levy County received about \$193,000 for “school-hardening” and this includes the two charter schools within the district.

However, this partially-funded mandate from the state government does not provide the approximately \$387,000 needed for safety in Levy County.

On Wednesday, Cowart said mandates from the state government force school boards all over the state to make difficult choices.

Every school district, he added, always finds a way. For instance, in Levy County, perhaps every school bus is not new. And, as many people know, perhaps not every gymnasium is air-conditioned.

“Our staff does an amazing job,” Cowart said on Wednesday, “spreading the dollars as far as they can.”

The fourth and final “ask” of the legislators from the Levy County School Board is in regard to the state’s end-of-course exam results.

School boards want home rule, Cowart said, however there are approximately 40 different way throughout the state to assess end of course exams. Cowart said he believes there is one school district where a student need only sign his or her name, and that qualifies as a 100 percent grade on the end-or-course exam.

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This makes a difference to colleges, especially in regard to the numbers they look at for admission and scholarships. A student from one district may show a 3.74 grade-point average, with the end-of-course exam figuring into that score, when a student from Levy County shows a 3.5 GPA.

Meanwhile the Levy County student is bumped from the scholarship as a result, and while the other student is accepted, the college or university discovers they do not perform as their GPA would have forecast them to perform.

As a result of non-standardized end-of-course assessment practices, Levy County may “undersell” these students who would “over-perform” if they were put in the same classes as a student from a district where the assessments are less stringent.

After Superintendent of Schools Edison said Levy County had looked at the various end-of-course guidelines, Rep. Stone asked if Clay County was seen as one that would be agreeable – making reference to Sen. Bradley’s home county. Edison intimated that he found Clay County’s assessments to be equal with Levy County.



Bronson Town Clerk Shirley Miller addresses the Levy County Legislative Delegation on behalf of Bronson Mayor Bruce Greenlee.

She apologized to the state leaders on behalf of Mayor Greenlee who was unable to attend that morning.

The Town of

Bronson is fiscally constrained, she said. The focus this year, Miller said, is for the town to improve infrastructure for its 1,100 residents.

The Florida Small County Outreach Program (SCOP) provided the town with \$375,000, Miller replied when asked by Bradley, for a sidewalk from the courthouse to James H. Cobb Park.

There was another \$650,000 Florida Recreation Development Assistance Program (FRDAP) grant to help the town’s parks and recreation as well, she said.

Bradley said state legislators like to hear that the money the state is giving to counties and municipalities to improve facilities, is being used and that the residents and visitors to those places are enjoying the results. Another state grant program is named Small County Road Assistance Program (SCRAP).

SCRAP, SCOP, FRDAP and other grant programs are relatively well-utilized in fiscally-constrained counties such as Levy County.

Representatives from the Bronson Volunteer Fire Department also asked the state for funding to build a new fire station on the field of property northwest of the UF/IFAS

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Extension office in Bronson.

The request for the new structure includes space for volunteers to sleep and eat there, in an effort to make a 24-hour-day facility.



Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt addresses the Levy County Legislative Delegation on behalf of the people of Inglis.

INGLIS MAYOR DRINDA MERRITT

Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt said the water supply and water quality issues are always vital in the state.

The septic-to-sewer conversion plan for southern Levy County is continuing to move forward. Mayor Merritt has been a champion of this effort.

She anticipates that within the next four to six weeks to share with these state leaders an engineering plan for that project.

“Without help from the state,” Merritt said, “we are not going to be able to move forward with our project.”

Funding provided two years ago has been applied to complete the feasibility study and the engineering plan, she said, adding that the people are grateful for the help so far.

Mayor Merritt made a phenomenal announcement Monday that affects southern Levy County, northern Citrus County and western Marion County.

Private investors have stepped forward to fund the construction of a whitewater kayaking venue in Inglis, she said.

That project is moving rapidly along, Merritt said.

“It looks like we may not need state funding for that project,” Merritt said.

This venue conservatively will have a \$23 million positive economic impact on the Levy-Citrus-Marion counties’ area around Inglis, she said.

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APPLETON FUNDING



College of Central Florida President James D. Henningsen, Ed.D. shares with the state leaders a request for financial aid to keep the Appleton Museum of Art operational. The college president also shared with the state leaders information about CF's success to date and a bright future for its programs. He also expressed his appreciation for the state's help in building the CF Jack Wilkinson – Levy County – Campus.

The CF president is seeking help from the Legislative Delegation for the state to assist the college in funding for the institution, which is owned now by CF.

The long and storied history of The Appleton Museum of Art includes some wrangling over funds. As Dr. Henningsen mentioned to the legislators, and as they know, this museum is a crown jewel for the area, especially in regard to its intrinsic value to the arts and humanities in this part of Florida. Following is the whole story as noted in a brochure about its history.

Founded in 1982, the museum was a gift from Arthur I. Appleton to the Ocala community.

The City of Ocala donated the 44-acre site for the home of the museum to the Appleton Cultural Center Inc., a not-for-profit corporation.

Construction began in 1984. Mr. Appleton paid for the construction of the over 80,000 square-foot museum and contributed 18,000 art pieces to the collection.

The Appleton publicly opened in 1987. For the first few years, the museum was operated by the City of Ocala.

In 1990, the Appleton Cultural Center Inc. wanted to transfer ownership and operation of the Museum to another entity. Jim Kirk, Chair of the College of Central Florida District Board of Trustees (now known as College of Central Florida or CF)

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approached the president of the college about taking over the operation.

A proposal was made to the State Board of Community Colleges, which included a request for operating funds. The proposal was approved, but the funding was reduced by 50 percent and the CF was advised to find another partner. CF did receive a recurring appropriation of \$188,000 for operation of the Museum.

Kirk approached Florida State University (FSU) about the possibility of becoming a partner in the Museum, and the FSU agreed to accept shared ownership and operating responsibilities.

The ownership was transferred as an undivided interest in the property (land and museum buildings), to the CF Foundation and the FSU Foundation on June 29, 1990. The art collections, furniture and equipment, which had been deeded to the Appleton Cultural Center Inc., were deeded to the FSU Foundation. In addition, FSU was given the Appleton Museum endowments which were used to create the Appleton Eminent Scholar Chair at FSU.

On June 2, 1992, CF and FSU signed an agreement to operate the Appleton Museum of Art as joint partners. That agreement was amended one time (October 1997) when the museum employees were transferred from CF to FSU after the FSU received a special appropriation from the 1997 Legislature to offset a portion of the cost of operating the museum.

On June 9, 1992, The CF Foundation and the FSU Foundation each granted a 49-year lease to the CF and to FSU, on behalf of the Board of Regents, for the land and buildings. The lease was amended in December 2002 to reflect the change in governance and to extend the term of the lease to 2051.

CF and FSU each appointed members to an Oversight Committee according to the 1992 agreements. That Committee has operated continuously since its appointment.

FSU received a gift of \$2 million for the construction of an addition to the Museum. The state matched the gift and FSU constructed the Edith Marie Appleton Wing. The project was completed in 1996.

To comply with the ownership requirements of the state, the land under the wing was leased to the Internal Improvement Trust.

In addition to the original gifts, the FSU Foundation received several additional gifts. A portion of those gifts was designated for specific purposes including gifts restricted to supporting the operation costs of the museum.

FSU received plant operating funds for the wing in the 1996 Legislative session.

In 1997, FSU and CF collaborated on a request to the Legislature for operating funds. The Legislature appropriated funds of approximately \$1,000,000 to FSU for that purpose.

In the 2003 Legislature, FSU requested and received additional plant operating funds for the original structures bringing the total for plant expenditures to about \$410,000.

In 2004, there was a disagreement between FSU and the Appleton family regarding the appropriate use of the endowment fund. The Appleton family sued FSU. As a result of the lawsuit, both parties agreed to transfer ownership to CF which included the endowment and the state appropriations used to operate the museum.

Since 2004, the Museum is solely supported by CF. The artwork collection is owned by the CF Foundation.

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In 2017, new House leadership in Tallahassee reviewed all special projects over the last 15 years that were identified in general appropriations acts. Because of the transfer of the state recurring appropriations from FSU to CF in 2004, the House deemed the Appleton as a special project up for review. CF was successful in convincing the House and Senate to keep the museum in the budget.

However, the House kept the museum as a separate line item eligible for a possible veto by the governor. Gov. Rick Scott subsequently vetoed the museum in order to provide funding for Enterprise Florida and Visit Florida.

The museum has remained open on dwindling endowment funds. Without recurring state funding, the museum will eventually have to close its doors.

OTHER MATTERS



Standing at the podium and preparing to present the Legislative Delegation with a well-voiced statement in regard to the Tobacco-Free Coalition of Levy County, Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) and the QuitDoc Foundation are (from left) Laycee Hallman, a student at the College of Central Florida and a former Levy County SWAT member, Chiefland High School SWAT Member Emma Ronchetti and QuitDoc Foundation Tobacco Prevention Specialist Rebecca Zachry. Ronchetti and Hallman shared some of the highlights from SWAT's recent past, including the success of making some public facilities tobacco-free zones.

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Dr. Frank Catalanotto of the group named Floridians for Dental Access explains to the legislators that dental therapy by licensed dentists can save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars annually. For instance, there were 166,997 visits to emergency rooms in 2016 by people seeking relief from non-traumatic dental pain that equaled \$322 million. Dr. Catalanotto wants the Florida Legislature to get on board with the concept of dental therapy, not only to help more humans have better dental care, but to save taxpayers money. Floridians for Dental Access is a coalition made up of a wide variety local groups and organizations who see every day how vulnerable populations in Florida struggle to be seen by a dentist. This group supports bringing affordable dental care to these populations by authorizing dental therapists. For more information about this group, please visit <http://floridiansfordentalaccess.com/>. Dr. Catalanotto said that any person who is against the dental therapy program proposed by this group will be unable to show facts behind their opposition, and this is in contrast with what these dentists and others can prove to be true in regard to best methods of helping the most people have dental care in Florida.