

## Response to *The State* Editorial April 12, 2009

Dear Editor:

I wanted to respond to your editorial this Sunday entitled "Overhaul due for city benefits and pay plans." You are correct that the City is changing the way we do business. These changes are required because of past mistakes and problems and because of the current recession and escalation of health care costs. We are changing the practices and culture of the City in a number of ways.

First, the City is engaged in a comprehensive process to restructure our financial reporting and Finance Department. We have hired four new employees in Accounting and Treasury, including CPAs. Our financial statements are now provided monthly. A team with the City's IT Department has worked very closely with accounting staff, our finance software provider Sungard to improve the City's financial software, IFAS. Additionally, the City has taken steps to insure that we never have these problems again. We have established an Audit Committee made up of Council members to monitor finances. The City is hiring an internal auditing firm as a permanent, independent, outside watchdog on City finances.

Secondly, the City's financial statements and the IFAS system-our checkbook, will be online. Our Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports and revenue-expense statements are already on the City website. I want to thank Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom for his leadership in establishing a statewide website for local governments to voluntarily post their financial information. Columbia will embrace this effort to make our finances transparent and open.

Thirdly, the City has retained Towers-Perrin, a nationally recognized health care consultant, to revise our health care benefits plan. We have adopted a new health care benefit plan for active employees that will save money but provide very good and competitive benefits. We are also concluding changes in retiree health benefits that are required by new national accounting rules.

Fourth, the budget for the upcoming year will reflect a number of efforts to deliver services more efficiently and more effectively. We have established a budget committee, chaired by Councilman Kirkman Finlay, and we are working together as a team on Council to adopt a budget that delivers services without a tax increase.

The City is changing the way we do business. Past problems and current economic conditions require change. While we are making these changes and delivering basic services, we are also seizing our economic future during this severe economic recession. We are going after every Stimulus dollar to put our citizens to work. We are also going to use Stimulus monies to create lasting change by being part of the national priority of creating a green economy. Because of the steps we have already taken in future fuels research and commercialization, the entrepreneurial ecosystem we are building, and efforts to become more energy efficient and independent, our region is poised to benefit exponentially from the "green revolution." The National Hydrogen Association Convention held in Columbia this month is an example of our efforts. We have

established a Sustainability and Green Jobs Initiative to identify, prioritize and coordinate our efforts to pursue the “green revolution” in the Columbia region for the short and long-term needs of our community.

The City is committed to correcting past problems, insuring that those problems do not occur again, and seizing future opportunities.