



BY RICHARD SHUMATE

DEFENDING HIS

misguided legislation to limit the powers of Fulton County's tax commissioner, Rep. Douglas Dean told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: "I

want a tax commissioner who is sensitive to people's financial condition and who will work with people. We have to be concerned about more than collecting taxes."

With all due respect, Rep. Dean, no, we

PUNISHMENT FOR A JOB WELL DONE

Swipe at Fulton tax commissioner misguided, misdirected

don't. A tax collector's job is not to be a warm-and-fuzzy, sensitive New Age guy. His job is to collect as much money as he can, as efficiently as possible. If people aren't paying what they owe, he needs to come down on them, hard, because letting them slide is monstrously unfair to those who are paying their taxes.

And by any measure, Tax Commissioner Arthur Ferdinand does his job extremely well.

Inheriting a mess when he was appointed in 1997 — with an astonishing backlog of \$200 million of delinquent property taxes — Ferdinand has gone after scofflaws with a vengeance. He's tried to shame them by publicly releasing their names. He's tried to get their attention by selling tax liens on their property to private collection firms.

Ferdinand has even been willing to take on

the politically powerful. He tangled with Fulton County Commission Chairman Mike Kenn over liquor tax payments for his two restaurants. And he recently put the Summerhill Neighborhood Development Corp., headed by the aforementioned Dean, on his tax delinquency list.

As a result of this aggressive stance, a curious thing happened. When Ferdinand stopped accepting "dog ate my homework" excuses and started expecting people to pay their taxes, they started paying their taxes. His office has achieved a whopping 99 percent collection rate.

Where is anything else anywhere in the creaky machinery of Fulton County government boasting a 99 percent success rate? Ferdinand has stood fast for the best interests of taxpayers, making any number of enemies, including Dean, who describes him as "out of control."

Out of *his* control, yes. And taxpayers should be thankful.

Dean's legislation, which passed the legislature and is now on Gov. Roy Barnes' desk, would stop Ferdinand from selling tax liens in bulk, require him to wait a full year before selling a lien, and reduce the interest and penalties that a private company buying liens could impose. In essence, it whittles down the big stick Ferdinand uses to motivate people to pay their property taxes.

Dean also pushed through another bill that would make Ferdinand's post elected, rather than appointed — a sop to those who have been trying unsuccessfully for years to get him fired.

Supporters portray this legislation as an effort to stop a power-mad bureaucrat from throwing poor, disabled widows into the snow by selling liens on their property to heartless fat-cat investors. That's rubbish. County commissioners no longer allow the sale of tax liens on homes owned by elderly or poor people who live on their property.

The dirty little secret here is that many of the property tax deadbeats are not poor homeowners — they're absentee landlords with political connections upset that the county's hands-off tax collection policy has come to an end.

Dean and his cohorts also decry the hefty interest and penalties being imposed on delinquent taxpayers by companies buying liens. But those fees were set by state law in 1995 in an effort to improve tax collection, not by Ferdinand's fiat. And there is a surefire way to avoid paying those high fees: Pay your taxes.

If Dean really wants to show sensitivity to the financial plight of taxpayers, he should aim at the politicians who set tax rates. The blame lies with county commissioners and members of the Atlanta City Council, who've built wasteful, expensive socialist empires on the backs of taxpayers.

If Dean really cared about Fulton taxpayers, he would push legislation to rein in tax-and-spend politicians like Emma Darnell, Nancy Boxill and Bill Campbell. And if King Roy really cares about us, he will take up his veto pen. ♦

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