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Yellow flag: Rackleff raises the right cautions

Leon County Commissioner Bob Rackleff isn't the most influential elected official in local government, but he's often among the most well-prepared. He's a serious student of public policy who tries to articulate the issues facing local government in a global context.

In a memo this week to commissioners and administrators in both city and county governments, Mr. Rackleff analyzed the impact of the record-high cost of crude oil and the U.S. foreign-credit crisis on local decision-making, particularly with regard to growth policies.

"The foreign creditors so willing in recent years to lend us billions of dollars a day are now having second thoughts and demanding higher returns to make up for losses as their dollar investments lose value — jeopardizing our ability to invest in our industries — or even to continue to own our industries. Foreign takeovers of U.S. businesses are again on the rise.

"As a result, reducing oil use is an economic imperative, not just an environmental imperative. On our current course, we are driving our community into poverty. Each dollar we spend to waste motor fuels is a dollar that will not buy something produced locally. The exploding cost of oil should be crisis enough to change our growth management and transportation policies."

Mr. Rackleff goes on to say that policies promoting sprawl and continued road-building are "even more unsustainable today."

"It won't be enough just to buy a few hybrid cars for our city and county fleets — or to install a solar panel here or there — or dream about alternative fuels," he wrote. "We must get serious — to enable people to walk and ride buses, to direct new growth inward, to require energy efficiency standards for new construction, to rebuild schools in our urban center, and to stop caving in to real estate developers' selfish demands."

Mr. Rackleff's style and strategy can be polarizing. It has cost him a chance at leadership: County commissioners have declined to put him in the rotation for the chairmanship since he was first elected in 1998.

But part of why he's marginalized is because he's uncompromising in saying things others don't want to hear. Characteristically, his memo Wednesday identified several tough truths about growth-related challenges facing local government.

However much they might prefer to dismiss the messenger, commissioners in this case would be wise to listen to Mr. Rackleff's message.