County hall’s big pay raise: commissioners need not apply

As a 9.1% property value rise swells Miami-Dade tax revenue, most county hall employees are in line for a 4% cost-of-living pay hike starting Oct. 1. But one group with many more members deserves a bigger increase.

Talk about cost-of-living: a $6,640 salary in 1970 would, with inflation, have the purchasing power of $55,296 in 2016, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. But we still pay the same $6,600, though the job then was very part-time and today it’s full time plus, handling budgets greater than those of many nations.

We pay these commissioners just 36% of Florida’s $58.05 hourly minimum wage as they spending billions of our dollars. How in the world can we expect their full commitment about thinking of how to line our own wallets in the process? It’s just not logical.

The state, not residents, sets commission pay in every county but Miami-Dade — we’re so big that we set our own state-wide, it’s done by county size — the bigger the county, the higher the pay rate for commissioners.

In Liberty County, Florida’s smallest with 8,365 residents, commissioners last year got $24,719, the state’s lowest rate but up 203% from decades earlier. Miami-Dade, population 2.7 million, still pays the same $6,600 it always has.

The five biggest counties in the state other than Miami-Dade last year paid commissioners $58,888 each. We paid our collective 13-member county commission $78,000, far less in total than many aides get individually. How smart is that?

Commissioners themselves are unlikely to raise their own pay. The only way it could happen is if the voters approve a constitutional amendment allowing the commissioners to set their own salaries.

But this is a relevant point: if you ever vote for a candidate for county commissioner, you have to vote for someone who could raise your property taxes if they get elected.

So why haven’t they?

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The Writer

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Brain Drain: Fact? Fiction? Or a little of both?

Depending upon whom you speak with in the business community, “brain drain” is either a serious issue in South Florida or a fiction that people worry about.

In any given month, corporate executives with whom I interact will proclaim: “FL is turning out some great MBA students. We intend to hire a lot more from your school,” while others will proclaim: “We can’t find talent here; your best and brightest leave and don’t return.”

To begin with, any honest and accurate discussion of “brain drain” should dispense with the term altogether. In our 21st century, globalized and interconnected world, the more relevant term is “brain mobility.”

Talented individuals have more choices than ever regarding where they choose to live and work, depending, of course, on the labor market demands for their particular skills and the quality of life they wish to enjoy. Just as with the removal of tariff barriers and the continuing liberalization of trade, investments and finance decisions will rest with a free market, so too will the free mobility of individuals.

But what about the notion or accusation that, one, companies cannot find talent here and, two, that the best and brightest leave?

The first accusation is baseless. Firms cannot find talent here, then they are not looking hard enough. If there were such a dearth of talent, would the vast constellation of companies in financial services, real estate, health care, IT and other services be present throughout the tri-county area, not to mention expanding their operations here? Would the business community not be up in arms if our local higher education institutions were turning out the quality of graduates they sought hire? Organizations such as the Beacon Council, through its Academic Leaders Council’s Talent Development Network and New Leaders Taskforce, are working hard to promote local talent; and Miami-Dade College’s two-year technical college programs along with the proliferation of non-college coding academies are testimony to the fact that talent should not be defined as a four-year college degree.

As for the best and the brightest leaving, that often occurs in other places as well. Many in the top 10% of high school graduating classes attend top-tier universities. There they develop connections and networks, including relationships with recruiters at prestigious companies.

Not surprisingly, they do not return to their hometowns after graduation but begin their careers elsewhere. They may well return to their hometowns, however, if opportunities arise after they have achieved success elsewhere. In essence, the exodus of top talent is often less about what their communities lack than what other locales have in quality and reputation.

For example, a high school graduate from Cleveland who decides to study at Columbia University because of its interest in investment banking or management consulting will not for a job after graduation in New York, not Miami, Houston or Minneapolis. A Miami high school graduate interested in film and entertainment will probably make UCLA or his or her first choice college and seek employment in that industry afterward.

The students from the US and abroad, who are interested in college and a career in hospitality management, health care and international business will rank Miami high on their list of places to study and work.

It is important to recognize, too, that as a global city with a Heavy Latin American focus, Miami is a beneficiary of brain gain attracting many of the best and brightest from the Americas. (Courtesy of the late Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro, we have been blessed with a continuing cadre of Venezuelan students who are among the best I have taught.) There are many “quality of life” factors that will continue to make our community a beneficiary of brain mobility — talent coming and going. This is particularly true in the area of startups, where Miami ranks number two worldwide, according to the Kauffman Foundation.

Economist Edward Glaeser has produced compelling research that concluded that human capital adds to productivity and productivity growth at the city and metropolitan levels. Striving to become one community with one overarching goal, targeting promising industries for growth and development, Miami and South Florida in general will increase attractiveness as a place where talent can thrive.