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\$400,000 worth of waste

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Here's what \$400,000 a year buys for Hillsborough County taxpayers: A county auditor who has no job description, no record of accomplishment, no real tasks and no independence. Citizens must wonder: Where do I apply?

The auditor was sold in 2002 as a way to reduce wasteful county spending; voters bought it and added the office to the county charter. Yet the agency never had the budget, direction or independence to deliver, and it quickly became a political tool for commissioners to smear their favorite targets, from the public transit system to environmental protection.

As *St. Petersburg Times* staff writer Bill Varian reported last year, the county conducted more audits before creating the office than it has since. Commissioners are so bewildered about how auditor Jim Barnes spends his time that they have stripped him of almost every responsibility. Now a peer review ordered by the county and completed this week finds that the auditor's work falls short of professional standards. True to form, Barnes is now wasting time responding to this report. It's like watching a cat chase its tail.

But replacing Barnes would fix only half the problem. Given the charter language and budgetary constraints, any new auditor would still lack the money and autonomy to be truly effective. It is the county administrator's job, anyway, to run the operation efficiently. Commissioners could always hire outside auditors, and the county clerk, Pat Frank, has offered to lend her expertise, too.

This office has flopped because the proposal was half-baked in 2002, and commissioners ran with the idea to paint themselves as fiscally prudent. But how do you justify spending \$400,000 a year on a do-nothing operation at the same time the recession is forcing the county to charge its residents to use the parks? The commission should end the bleeding by giving voters the opportunity to repeal the post at the November general election.

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