

BROOKSVILLE

—At least one Hernando County commissioner is wondering if it's time to discuss the future of county administrator Len Sossamon, who has been on the job for nearly seven years. Commissioner Jeff Holcomb, who recently was reelected to a second term, made the suggestion at Tuesday's meeting, even though Sossamon's contract doesn't end for another two years. Holcomb has been the most critical among commissioners on Sossamon's annual evaluations. Commissioners grew concerned during the recent budget-writing season, when the county faced a \$6 million shortfall and ordered Sossamon to take action. They declared that they had lost confidence in the county's budget director. Sossamon fired budget director Pam Lee and brought back retired county budget director George Zoettlein. On Tuesday, Holcomb asked for a consensus of the board to review Sossamon's contract. Commissioner Wayne Dukes said he didn't see the need. Dukes consistently has marked Sossamon at the top of the evaluation scale in every category. Commission Chairman Steve Champion added that Sossamon "is doing a great job." Previous coverage: Scores slip for Hernando County administrator. Budget troubles to blame. Commissioner John Allocco said there was room for discussion. Neither he nor Champion were on the board when the previous commission gave Sossamon a four-year renewal. By contract, a majority of the board can call for a review between Jan. 24 and Feb. 8, and must notify Sossamon that they are considering ending his contract. Commissioner John Mitten, appointed to his seat this year by Gov. Rick Scott, agreed to re-look the contract, but only in the context of how the county should handle economic development. Sossamon, who wears the dual hats of county administrator and county economic development director, earns a salary and benefit package of \$295,684. Various political factions in the county have criticized or praised that arrangement. And they have offered the names of politically-connected business people they would like to see in the economic development role. Sossamon's deputy administrator, Jeff Rogers, has taken a lead role in many county issues, Allocco said, and he could see discussing the high dollar amount of Sossamon's contract in that context. Commissioners alluded to a planned discussion at their Dec. 18 meeting regarding the county's tight budget. Efforts continue to fix problems from previous years, when the county spent more money than it brought in. Mitten said the discussion also should include a look at county union contracts. "The cost of government is systemically increasing," he said. "We can't just focus on one person." Commissioners have held onto the idea that taxes can't go up, Mitten said, but they also need to discuss how to keep costs in check. Champion agreed to a discussion including union contracts, because some have escalating salary scales that increase overall personnel costs by 5 percent a year, and "no private business can sustain that." He also repeated that he won't raise taxes. Commissioners agreed to re-open discussion of Sossamon's contract in late January. Contact Barbara Behrendt at or (352) 848-1434. Follow .