

THE MIAMI HERALD | EDITORIAL

Gravy train must end

OUR OPINION: Stop banking vacation and sick time

It has been going on for years in government. Administrators and workers in cities, counties and school boards across South Florida pile up their sick time and vacation days and when they decide to leave for greener pastures years later — Bam! — taxpayers are hit with mega-payouts.

Whenever high-level officials quit, such as the recent defections at the City of Miami, Miami-Dade County and the Broward School Board, they collect handsome payouts for all the vacation days they never took and the sick days they didn't need. In some cases, employees get paid a "bonus" just for showing up! The rationale has always been that government doesn't pay as well as the private sector for comparable jobs so the benefits are better to attract and keep top employees.

That may have been true in the 1970s or even the 1980s, but for the past 20-plus years public salaries have closed in on private sector ones, and in some cases surpassed them, particularly in South Florida. Public employees' benefits, meanwhile, have grown to become unsustainable, particularly when revenues from property taxes continue to tank in a tough economy.

Something has to give. Start by doing away with accrued vacation time and leave sick days banked for illness — not as a bonus plan upon retirement or voluntary departure.

It's one thing to have a severance package of, say, 12 weeks for employees who are forced out because of bad economic conditions. It's quite another to reward employees on the public's dime for leaving of their own volition. Talk about gravy train!

Miami-Dade School Board member Marta Pérez will bring up a proposal at the board's meeting Wednesday that seeks to put a laser focus on payouts for administrators. Good. That focus should be on all employees, too, and factored in to the next round of negotiations with unions working for the district.

Fellow board members should give the nod to Ms. Pérez's proposal. It would require School Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, who has done a fine job during a tough time, to review current sick time and vacation policies and offer new approaches.

A spot check by Ms. Pérez's office at the accrued leave time for 30 top administrators found that if they all were to leave tomorrow, the school district would have to pay \$2.5 million for accrued time. Nine of those 30 account for \$1.2 million of that sum, and four of the administrators and non-union professionals whose salaries were surveyed would receive payouts in excess of their annual salary. Among them would be administrators who have retired under the state's DROP program and returned six months later at comparable pay and with vacation time and sick days accruing again for their next departure.

Let's end the abuse — fairly and for all.