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My Word: State's computers about to crash

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By **Barney T. Bishop III** | Special to the Sentinel

It is time to hit the delete button on the state's Band-Aid approach to its information technology systems. Our state agencies are hampered with old, worn-out computer systems. Many of these legacy systems are maintained by long-time staffers who are the only ones who know how to maintain and run these computers. When they retire, there will be no one to run these outdated systems.

For example, the Agency for Workforce Innovation's Unemployment Compensation mainframe is officially ancient. It has broken down and been temporarily fixed, yet unemployed citizens are increasing at an incredible rate. The Department of Revenue — the agency responsible for the intake of monthly sales-tax receipts — would like to move into the state's secure-data center, but doesn't have the state funds to do so. What happens if these departments' computers are damaged or destroyed? What about other agencies that have life/safety responsibilities and old computer systems?

Although Florida could be the third-largest state by population after the next census, New York — the current place-holder — is spending twice as much as Florida to ensure its business systems and technology infrastructure are world-class and cost-effective.

Three years ago, Associated Industries of Florida created the Information Technology Council to help drive issues from the technology and business community to the Legislature. We worked with Gov. Charlie Crist to establish the Cabinet-level Agency for Enterprise Information Technology to help coordinate the necessary modernization of the state's business and technology systems. The state must continue to work to protect itself and to decrease its costs.

So how does Florida accomplish this in a time of limited funding? First, we should use one-time federal stimulus dollars as a down payment on new systems and infrastructure. Second, we should consider letting the private sector underwrite or fund infrastructure enhancements as has been done for transportation infrastructure. Finally, as the state considers large-scale technology projects, all vendors should be invited to a series of meetings that would enable them to offer informed choices to the Cabinet-level technology agency. The agency can then vet the proposals and recommend those of highest priority.

The governor and the Legislature should use all available means to keep Florida's IT infrastructure operational, secure and safe. This will not be inexpensive. But, this is a pay-me-now-or-pay-me-later situation. We cannot continue to ignore the possibility that our current legacy computers could prevent Florida from providing the vital services citizens expect because we refused to heed the many warnings.

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