

# viewpoint

## A new wrinkle in the sales tax debate



**ron littlepage**  
times-union columnist

Mousing around the news of the day ... *click*. An interesting new figure has unexpectedly appeared in the debate over Mayor Lenny Curry's sales tax plan.

After several months of portraying the new half-cent sales tax that would begin in 2030 as being strictly about erasing pension debt and not immediate budget relief, the Curry administration now says there may be \$40 million in annual savings beginning with the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1, 2017.

The estimate is based on some new actuarial findings the Mayor's Office has seen.

It will be interesting to learn how such a conclusion was reached.

If true, \$40 million is nothing to sneeze at when city services are being cut for a lack of revenue and have been underfunded for years.

The budget that goes into effect this Oct. 1 won't be impacted, but if the extra money materializes the next year, what will it be used for?

Lori Boyer, the incoming City Council president, told the Times-Union editorial board last week that the city has a backlog of infrastructure needs totalling \$750 million.

During an earlier editorial board meeting, Sheriff Mike Williams reiterated that he needs more officers as well as funding to update communication equipment and for a future body camera program.

Money is needed for libraries, parks and downtown.

Curry has stayed away from saying how any future budget savings would be used if they materialize.

With \$40 million possibly on the table, he may have no choice but to answer that question if he wants people to support his plan.

*Click.* We all know how State Attorney Angela Corey's campaign manager, who has since resigned that post, filed the paperwork for a write-in candidate, which in effect disenfranchised 450,000 voters and means only Republicans will have a voice in choosing the next state attorney.

That was a cheap trick, a sham, dirty politics — you pick the description.

Well, here's one that tops it.

The Palm Beach Post reports that Port of Palm Beach Commissioner Jean Enright, a Democrat, has drawn a write-in candidate, which would close the Aug. 30 primary to Republicans and independents.

The write-in candidate is Ruby Landair, Enright's mother, who had done the same thing in 2012.

According to the Post, Enright had planned on her daughter filing as the write-in candidate, quoting her as saying, "I asked my daughter this year, and she said, 'Oh, Mama, just let Grandma do it.'"

Do you think that just maybe this write-in candidate foolishness should end?

*Click.* Here's another question:

The Tampa Bay Times and Miami Herald Tallahassee Bureau reports that 100 full-time troopers will be among 134 Highway Patrol employees being sent to Cleveland to provide security and crowd control at the Republican National Convention.

You read that right. The estimated cost to Florida taxpayers could be as high as \$611,000.

According to the report, a spokesperson for the Department of Highways and Motor Vehicles said the troopers' absence from Florida and the absence of 34 other employees will have no impact on FHP operations.

Considering that, are they really needed here?

*Click.* Gov. Rick Scott has made a career of bashing President Barack Obama and opposing him at every turn.

Then our governor, who thinks the federal government is evil and always sticking its nose where it has no business, had the nerve to ask that same federal government to declare an emergency in the state of Florida because of the Orlando nightclub massacre.

That would have made \$5 million in federal money available.

The governors of other states that have experienced similar mass shootings have never made such a request.

Is anyone surprised that the Obama administration told Scott no?

*Click.*

[ron.littlepage@jacksonville.com](mailto:ron.littlepage@jacksonville.com): (904) 359-4284

# reason midweek

## Will pension reform help everyone?

### point of view

richard cuff

To understand the city of Jacksonville pension reform dilemma you have to understand how we got into this pension mess in the first place.

This one sentence from a Times-Union story by David Bauerlein sums it up: "Even though the unfunded liability started to grow in 2001, the city continued its years-long pursuit of cutting property taxes."

Say no more. Raising the sales tax hurts those who spend a large majority of their income on taxable consumer goods using income that has already been taxed. It's like saying we must now "bite the bullet" while it's the poor and struggling middle class that actually take the bullet.

I get it that the unfunded liability is the difference between what the pension fund assets are worth and what it costs the city to maintain 30 years of payments to the retirees.

But when the economy was booming, the "conservative" wisdom was to throw a party — and rather than remove the punch bowl, they spiked it with expensive champagne by giving even more tax cuts to wealthy property owners.

The right-wing conservative mindset to cut taxes when times are good and raise the sales tax when the going gets tough only benefits those who receive the tax cuts by giving them an ever-present taxpayer funded safety net against any future pain.

The African-American population is feeling that pain right now and has been feeling it for decades.

We are 30 percent of the city of Jacksonville, but we are affected by 100 percent the challenges this city faces.

We voted to raise the sales tax to create the Better Jacksonville Plan. Yet Northwest Jacksonville is no better today than it was before the plan.

*It would help if police body cameras and independent reviews of questionable police actions will also be funded through this tax increase.*

Asking this community to now bear the brunt of the coming fiscal tsunami to help the police and fire pension of tomorrow without addressing the need for reforming the way the police behave on the streets today shows that Mayor Lenny Curry has a single goal in mind.

Solving the pension problem is going to take across-the-board, top-to-bottom reforms in order to lower the price we all must pay.

In addition to extending the sales tax increase beyond 2030 and borrowing against tomorrow's revenue, we also need to raise the millage rate — which can be adjusted annually — increase employee contributions, cut wasteful spending, eliminate corporate welfare and stop giving tax breaks to the wealthy.

It would help if police body cameras and independent reviews of questionable police actions will also be funded through this tax increase.

The pension problem is not the problem at all; it is a symptom of an even bigger problem created by partisan politics, party loyalists, radical fiscal ideology, a lack of compassion and a loss of focus on that which is really important — our children and their future in this city.

Until the mayor makes it clear that there is more to his plan than simply dumping money into a pension abyss, getting this sales tax increase passed will be an uphill battle — as it should be.

Richard Cuff lives in Jacksonville.

## What are solutions for gun violence?



**diane dimond**  
creators syndicate

Oh, the empty rhetoric that spewed from politicians in the aftermath of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history!

The killer who perpetrated the awful mass murder at Pulse nightclub was an American citizen. So a ban on incoming Muslims is completely beside the point.

The killer was never on a no fly list (he was briefly on a terrorist watch list). He was a security guard, so passing any background check was a snap.

Finally, he did carry the Sig Sauer MCX but he also carried a handgun.

**LET'S LEARN LESSONS** Could we please learn lessons from these tragedies rather than toss around the same old stale suggestions that never get passed by Congress anyway?

More gun control laws? That would be like putting toothpaste back in the tube. There are already more than 300 million privately owned guns in America.

While I see no good reason for anyone to own one of these rapid-fire, high-capacity rifles, here's a question: Say legislation is passed to re-institute the AR-15 ban. Then what?

Do we rely on citizens to turn in their AR-15's to be destroyed? Do we police private homes looking for them? And what do we do with those citizens found possessing a gun that they bought legally but is suddenly outlawed — toss them into our already over-populated prisons?

A retired FBI veteran who has worked posts around the world told me: "It's not the guns. It's the people."

The truly criminal or disturbed, he said, do not pay attention to laws.

### DO A BETTER JOB OF IDENTIFYING

A federal law-enforcement source in the southwest suggested we look to the Europeans' example for the answer.

The European Union has some of the most stringent restrictions in the world for private possession of firearms.

But that didn't stop Islamic terrorists from getting assault weapons and gunning down 130 innocents in a soccer stadium and cafes in Paris, France, last

November.

So maybe it's up to behavioral scientists to do a better job identifying those who will commit mass murders?

Maybe the FBI needs to work harder to infiltrate terror cells.

"It's become harder to do the job right since the only reaction from the administration during/after these events has been, 'Islam is a religion of peace,' and 'We will not tolerate Islamophobia,'" a federal prosecutor who insisted on anonymity told me. "Political correctness is killing effective law enforcement."

### IT'S SIMPLISTIC TO FOCUS ON GUNS

It was a theme echoed by FBI sources across the country.

"Their hands are cuffed right now from continuing investigations, I can tell you that," a retired agent on the East Coast said.

Jim Clemente worked with an elite group of criminal profilers at the FBI. He said that it is "not possible to predict human behavior with certainty. No matter how you 'profile' active shooters, you cannot account for free will or hidden agendas."

With the Orlando killer there seem to have been so many identity conflicts.

He was a Muslim. But perhaps more than that, he was an angry man who regularly beat his ex-wife. He identified with radical rant against America and homosexuals. But by several accounts, he was gay — or bisexual — himself.

A 16-year FBI veteran and former member of the terror task force said: "I think the guy was so torn with his homosexual tendencies and he couldn't fight it, couldn't take it anymore. I think he may have used his religion as an excuse to kill all these people because ... he was disgusted with himself — and so this is the way he handled the demons inside of him."

So, with all this in play — radical Islamic thoughts, possible sexual-identity issues, gun violence — why is it we only discuss tackling the hardware part of the problem?

When do we get serious about the psychological part of the equation?

Simply throwing around the old-saw solutions gets us nowhere. And we've been on that path far too long.

■ [dianedimond.net](mailto:dianedimond.net)

## Drug threat is real, story is likely phony

**A story on the internet warns people to be careful of a stranger offering a card with some kind of service, such as house painting.**

The facts: An internet posting in 2008 by a woman in Texas told of a man at a gas station who gave her a card offering his services as a painter. She got in her car and saw the man getting into a car with another man. Almost immediately, she started to feel dizzy and could not catch her breath.

She realized that there was a strong odor coming from the card and that the men were following her. She went to a neighbor's house and honked her horn for help. The men left, but the victim felt bad.

She checked online and found a drug called "burundanga" that is used by criminals to incapacitate a victim.

David Emery, urban legends researcher for the information website About.com, found that the drug is used by criminals in Latin America to incapacitate their victims.

But news and law enforcement officials told Emery that burundanga



### FACT CHECK

Want something checked out? If you see or hear about something that needs a Fact Check, email us: [carole.fader@jacksonville.com](mailto:carole.fader@jacksonville.com)

is not regularly used in U.S. crimes.

The online story is almost certainly a fabrication, Emery says, as betrayed by two facts:

First, the victim allegedly received a dose of the drug by simply touching a business card. All medical sources contacted by Emery agree that burundanga must be inhaled, ingested or injected, or the subject must have prolonged topical contact with it (e.g., via a transdermal patch), to have an effect.

Second, the would-be victim told of a "strong odor" on the card. All sources told Emery that burundanga is odorless and tasteless.

Burundanga is the street version of the pharmaceutical drug scopolamine hydrobromide. It's made from the extracts of plants that can cause disorientation, loss of memory, halluci-

nations and stupor.

It has been used in Colombia to commit crimes, and the U.S. State Department still warns travelers to beware of "criminals in Colombia using disabling drugs to temporarily incapacitate tourists and others."

In March 2010, Houston resident Mary Anne Capo reported to police that a man approached her at a local gas station and handed her a church pamphlet, after which her throat and tongue began to swell. Those symptoms aren't consistent with those usually attributed to burundanga (dizziness, nausea, lightheadedness). Also, as already noted, it's unlikely to get a strong enough dose of burundanga through brief contact.

Emery agrees the pamphlet could have contained another type of chemical, but it was impossible to tell what happened as Capo didn't get a medical exam and says she tossed the pamphlet into a trash can.

Although the internet stories appear false, burundanga is a real drug, and travelers should check legitimate warnings — not those on the internet.

## Readers sound off on gun controls

### point of view

letters in brief

### OBAMA AND GUNS

President Barack Obama recently stated "when my girls are out and about it is comforting to know that they are being watched over by men with guns."

Why then does he want to keep guns out of the hands of private citizens? Are his daughters' lives more important than my daughters' lives?

Ann Woleslagle, Jacksonville Beach

### GUN CONTROL

A recent letter writer missed the most important fact: Gun related homicides are 20 times less in Europe.

Why so few? Better regulations. This is not a matter of "calling for the sun to rise in the west," but just asking that we follow the

example of Europe.

F. Christian Thompson, Ponte Vedra

### FOCUS ON AMMUNITION

Like everyone, I am disturbed about what has happened in Orlando.

Since the Second Amendment supporters will not allow a ban on guns, maybe doing something about the ammunition is a more doable solution.

James L. Brown, Jacksonville

### STOPPING TERRORISTS

Donald Trump's suggestion that we temporarily stop immigration of Muslims until they can be vetted for potential terrorism has been called a lot of things — "Un-American" at the top of the list.

But here's one simple question: "If someone offered you a bag of M & Ms, but told you that five to 10 of those "good candies" contained a poison

that would instantly kill anyone who consumed them, would you go ahead and eat a handful? Five? Even one? Think about it.

Pat Bloebaum, Jacksonville

### GUN CONTROL

Regarding Tia Mitchell's column, her question about "when is the right time to talk about guns" is on the mark.

It is infuriating that our Republican representatives came out with the statement that now is not the time, so they can bury gun regulations and the sale of AR-15s and AK-47s once again.

Keep asking them for answers and write in about what the rest of us can do to make them see how their constituents feel about this.

We are tired of their excuses and allegiance to the NRA.

Carolee Bertisch, Ponte Vedra Beach

### QUOTABLES

■ "Firing your campaign manager in June is never a good thing. The campaign will have to show dramatic changes immediately ... Otherwise it's just cosmetics." — Republican operative **Kevin Madden** after Donald Trump fired his campaign manager.

■ "I let you know, I'm in Orlando and I did the shootings." — Orlando gunman **Omar Mateen** to a 911 operator during his Orlando rampage.

■ "The economic model that the European Union embodies is a job-destroying, misery-inducing, unemployment-creating tragedy." — British Member of Parliament **Michael Gove**, urging voters to vote in favor of Britain leaving the European Union. Britain will hold a referendum Thursday on whether to leave or remain in the EU. Gove has been one of the lead campaigners for the "Leave" side.