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JULY 24, 2016
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One year ago today, toddler Lonzie Barton was reported missing, setting off a citywide 172-day search and investigation that ended in sorrow — and unanswered questions



Lonzie Barton, 21 months old, was reported missing on July 24, 2015, about 2:20 a.m.

'He belonged alive'



On Jan. 12 Charles Mack kneels in prayer while Deborah Hayes (left) and Catherine West add signs to the memorial that sprang up in the Bayard area, a few blocks from where the remains of Lonzie Barton were found the previous day.

By Eileen Kelley
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He was buried in a perfect casket under a perfect tree on a perfectly sunny day.

The effort to get to here, this final resting place, was not one in the traditional sense in which accomplishments and accolades accumulate over time, culminating in a life well-lived. For this was a short but difficult journey for a little boy who was dead before most of Northeast Florida knew his name.

A year ago today, when he was reported missing during a car theft, it seemed an entire region went looking

for Lonzie Barton.

Just 21 months old when his life was snuffed out, the toddler captured the local imagination, prompting prayers and moving strangers to search for him. Most of the searchers didn't know that a cadaver-sniffing dog had already alerted police — within hours of him being reported missing — that in all likelihood, the blue-eyed boy last seen wearing a diaper was already dead.

For 172 days police and the community looked for Lonzie. In January his body was found on Jacksonville's Southside, dumped under some tires.

Lonzie's mother, Lonna Lauramore

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Photos by Bob Self@jacksonville.com

Lonzie's mother, Lonna Lauramore Barton, and her boyfriend, William Ruben Ebron Jr., are now in prison for their role in the toddler's death.

Sales tax not enough for police, report says

Sheriff's task force urges combining Curry plan with property tax hike

By Nate Monroe
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In a rare case of public skepticism, a task force created by Sheriff Mike Williams argues Mayor Lenny Curry's highly touted pension-sales tax plan is a step in the right direction but would not provide enough money needed to support police or the larger community, according to a draft copy of the group's report.

The task force recommended Curry's plan be paired with increased property taxes, though it does not specify how much the tax rates should go up, and also called for larger investment in law enforcement than has been discussed by elected officials in City Hall.

"The task force concluded that by almost all measures of resources availability, the canard often proffered by citizens and politicians of both parties that Jacksonville has been a city trying to get by on the cheap for a long time, was mostly true," the report says.

Curry's sales-tax plan "was mostly a step in the right direction, but [the task force] also concluded that more needed to be done especially on the millage issue."

The group also challenged the sweeping assumption that Jacksonville's large pension debt was created by lavish retirement benefits for the rank-and-file, instead asserting that it stems from a failure by the city to invest in its police.

The report paints a grim

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How Jacksonville police salaries stack up to other departments, a list of sheriff's task force members. A-4

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DAILY DEAL!

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PENSION

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picture: Jacksonville police, some of the highest educated but lowest paid officers in major Florida cities, face unique challenges maintaining law and order in the largest city by area in the continental United States, where fiscal policy has historically prioritized rolling back the tax burden on residents. Starting salaries are abysmal next to comparable cities across the nation and in the state, and the overall police force is too low, all of which are forces that have led to increased resignations and early retirements, the task force found.

The “men and women of the JSO are caught between the fiscal contradictions of Duval County’s consolidated government, while facing increasing crime rates, perpetual high violence, and loss of peer employees to other agencies,” the report says. “These contradictions threaten the long-term viability and competitiveness of the agency in terms of recruitment and employee turnover, as well as morale and operational effectiveness.”

Other recommendations include hiring about 400 more police, swelling the force to about 2,000; bumping the starting pay to be more competitive; and keeping “all options open” when considering any new retirement plans, including 401(k) plans or merging with the Florida Retirement System.

For nearly a year, the task force studied the resources the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office will need in the future. It stems from an initiative by Williams in October to develop proposals the department can use in the areas of better engaging with the community, training officers, spending resources and improving transparency. The reports are being sent to Jacksonville University President Tim Cost, who is chairing the entire initiative. He is in the process of compiling the recommendations and, eventually, presenting them to Williams.

In total, the recommendations from the resources task force would be a heavy political lift, even for Curry, who has made law and order a top priority of his first term but has also re-



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A task force created by Sheriff Mike Williams (left) says the sales tax proposal of Mayor Lenny Curry won’t meet all the needs of police and the community.

peatedly and categorically ruled out any property tax increases as a way to solve Jacksonville’s pension or financial problems. He did so again at town hall meetings this past week.

The task force takes a more optimistic view.

“We believe that when adequately informed of these problems, Jacksonville’s citizens will strongly support modest increases in property tax rates necessary to keep Jacksonville safe and competitive,” the report says.

Jim Casey, who retired as the special agent in charge of the FBI’s Jacksonville Division and is now vice president of asset protection for Stein Mart, chaired the task force.

Casey said the 13-member group included a good cross section of the community including business people and business owners, a pastor and members with law enforcement experience and that they “were all in agreement on the conclusions in our report and that we undertook the assignment very seriously.”

As a candidate, Curry promised to hire 147 new police officers. He included money for 40 new officers and 40 community service officers in this year’s budget. He has proposed including money for 40 more of each in the 2016-17 budget. Community service officers are civilians empowered to handle minor call-outs such as traffic accidents so cops can handle more serious problems.

Hiring hundreds more to meet the 400 officers recommended by the report would stretch the city’s budget without any new revenue.

PENSION PLAN

Curry wants voters to approve a half-cent sales tax Aug. 30 that would not go into effect until a current sales tax that pays for infrastructure expires in 2030, meaning there would be no net change in what residents pay now. By state law, the pension sales tax could only be used to pay down the city’s \$2.8 billion retirement debt, which includes police and firefighters, general employees and corrections officers.

The law would also require the city to close at least one of its three pension plans to new hires.

The sales tax by itself offers no immediate financial relief in the years before it would begin in 2031.

The city also would essentially defer a big chunk of the city’s pension contributions until after the sales tax begins. That would free up \$40 million to \$68 million per year, though that save-now-pay-later approach would also increase the city’s overall cost of reducing the debt by \$1.51 billion.

“We believe the modest short term revenues generated by the sales tax offsetting debt payments are still insufficient to meet the city’s needs, based on the evidence,” the report says.

The report echoes a re-

frain that has come up in civic discussions for years that Jacksonville is a low-tax city relative to many of its peers. The city’s 11.44 millage rate is well below the state-allowed 20 mills.

The combined city-county property tax rates in Miami (14.229 mills), Tampa (13.2447 mills), St. Petersburg (14.6681 mills) and Tallahassee (12.5144 mills) are higher than Jacksonville’s 11.44 mills, according to 2014 side-by-side numbers. Only Orlando, at 10.4595 mills, has a lower property-tax rate.

Tallahassee and Orlando also have lower overall property-tax rates than Jacksonville when counting taxes for schools and multi-county agencies like water management districts.

On a larger level, Jacksonville’s tax burden — as a percentage of personal income — is below the average of cities with comparable populations and industry mixes, according to an audit of city finances Curry commissioned when he took office last year.

The overriding fiscal policy of Jacksonville elected leaders over the last two decades prioritized reducing the tax rate, though that trend has reversed some in recent years.

NEW RETIREMENT PLANS

Curry has vowed to close the city’s three retirement plans, though he has not said what would replace them. Any such changes would have to be worked

POLICE STARTING SALARY COMPARISONS

The task force surveyed police forces in comparable cities across the U.S. and in Florida and found that starting pay for Jacksonville deputies did not stack up well.

Law enforcement agency	Starting pay
Miami-Dade	\$50,490
Las Vegas metro	\$50,460
Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office	\$47,320
Tampa Police Department	\$47,320
Orlando Police Department	\$46,631
Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office	\$45,500
Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.	\$41,081
Indianapolis metro	\$39,446
Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office	\$36,240

TASK FORCE MEMBERS

Chairman: Jim Casey, vice president of asset protection for Stein Mart and retired special agent in charge of the FBI’s Jacksonville Division

Bill Bond, private investor and former banker
Debbie Buckland, Jacksonville market president for BB&T Bank

Bland Cologne, owner and president of First Coast Security

Tami Glover, owner and broker RE/MAX WaterMarke.

Michael Hallett, University of North Florida professor of criminology and criminal justice

Tony Hansberry, presiding elder, Suwanee North Jacksonville District, AME Church

Jack Meeks, president of Jack Meeks & Associates, CPAs.

Drew Messer, president of Vineyard Partners

Kent Stermon, chief operating officer of TMM

Charlie Wilson, Wilson & Johns P.A.

Larry Schmitt, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office liaison

Amy Winstead, Sheriff’s Office administrative assistant

out in collective bargaining.

Police and fire pensions account for the bulk of the city’s total debt, but reforms enacted last year have made retirement plans less expensive for taxpayers. Those reforms included a requirement that newly hired police and firefighters contribute 10 percent of pay toward their pensions, matched by a city contribution of 10 percent.

It’s not clear that a new plan — like a 401(k)-style option — would cost the city less.

A recent actuarial report commissioned by the Mayor’s Office, for example, used an assumption that a new retirement plan would require a 12 percent city contribution.

The theoretical advantage of a 401(k) plan for taxpayers is that it relieves the city of liability if investment performance is weak or if the market crashes; that burden would be carried by the employees. The risk is that such plans could be seen as less competitive.

The report also makes a forceful case that starting

pay should go up — a topic that could be addressed in collective bargaining if voters approve the sales tax. The Sheriff’s Office offers new officers \$36,240, an amount well below peer cities even though Jacksonville cops are required to have a college degree, or some offsetting military or law-enforcement experience, that other departments do not mandate.

The task force said that led to consistent bleed: In one case, a half-dozen specially trained SWAT and bomb detection officers were lured to other departments in Colorado that had higher pay and benefits, the report says.

Without taking steps to find more money, the report says, “the citizens of Jacksonville can anticipate longer police response times, increases in violent crime, continued loss of experienced police officers, and a less effective Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office performing the functions the citizens of the city need them to do.”

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LONZIE

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Barton, a drug-addicted stripper, is in the Gadsden Correctional Facility near Tallahassee with a 12-year sentence: five for her role in her son’s death and seven years on a drug charge from Baker County. Her boyfriend, William Ruben Ebron Jr., is in the Desoto Correctional Institute in Southwest Florida for Lonzie’s death. He’s scheduled to be there until 2040 after cutting a deal with prosecutors and leading them to Lonzie’s body. Lonzie’s father, Christopher Arin Barton, who was never charged in the boy’s death, is in prison on drug charges.

Ebron told investigators in January that Lonzie drowned in a bathtub while he and Lauramore Barton were having sex. Police don’t buy the story, one told in an 11th-hour move as his trial date neared.

“His history of telling lies is so pervasive that I don’t believe anything that comes out of his mouth,” said Scott Dingee, an assistant chief with the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office. “If we can’t prove it independently, then I don’t believe it.” He’s not alone.

OFFICERS GATHER TO REMEMBER

Last week Dingee was among 14 Sheriff’s Office employees involved in the Lonzie Barton case who gathered on the eve of the one-year anniversary of his death. It was the first time a large group of those on the front lines of the search assembled to share stories of the effort. The Times-Union and its news partner, First Coast News, spent 45 minutes with those in law enforcement most affected by and involved in the case.

They shared stories of what was called one of the longest nights they have ever had after the call first



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On Jan. 11, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office Chief of Investigations Tom Hackney, joined by Sheriff Mike Williams and State Attorney Angela Corey, announced the discovery of Lonzie Barton’s remains.

came about a missing boy last seen in a bright orange car. They shared stories of the sleepless nights spent wondering if all the creeks, ponds and mud holes across Jacksonville had been thoroughly checked for little Lonzie. They shared stories that surely there will be another Lonzie Barton-type case, because for reasons that they fail to understand, parents place drugs, alcohol and poor partner selection ahead of their children.

They shared how Ebron was a narcissist who liked to be in control.

“He kept telling lies after lies after lies,” said Tom Hackney, director of investigations and homeland security for the Sheriff’s Office.

Those lies were often easy to catch.

On July 24, 2015, Ebron called police about 2:20 a.m. and said his car, with Lonzie inside, had been stolen from his apartment

building’s parking lot and he was unable to chase it down.

Not long after, a residential security video surfaced that police released saying it showed Ebron staging the car theft.

Ebron stuck to his story, and even demanded an apology when confronted about the staged theft by detectives.

‘HE BELONGED ALIVE’

As days turned into weeks and then months with no clear sign of Lonzie, frustration mounted, and the prayer vigils and searches continued.

It was “absolutely very frustrating when you know there is a person that you can talk to that knows exactly what happened and where this little boy was and he won’t tell you. That is frustrating,” Dingee said. “But it’s part of what we do. We deal with that, unfortunately quite a bit, so it is not so unusual for us, but

it is absolutely frustrating when you have hundreds of people out there working and there is one person that can give you an answer right off the bat.”

When Ebron tried to wrest control of the situation back after learning Lauramore Barton was planning to testify against him at his trial, he took law enforcement officers back to the spot where he ditched Lonzie.

Time, heat and predators were so cruel to the tiny body in the trash heap that the autopsy was not conclusive on Lonzie’s cause of death.

Still, in April, what remained of Lonzie was placed in a perfect little casket and buried under a perfect tree on a perfectly sunny day, Hackney said.

“He belonged alive,” said Hackney, who attended the private funeral. “He deserved to live his life and that didn’t happen, but he certainly didn’t deserve to

be left under a tire and for that to be his final burial.”

PRAYERS AND PORCH LIGHTS

The story of Lonzie Barton didn’t end at the Turner Cemetery in Glen St. Mary. Lonzie lives on for many who receive daily spirituals and wishes of peace and love on Facebook pages created when Lonzie was reported missing. Those pages now honor his memory.

“You made the world a better place for those whose lives you touched,” read a posting July 16.

“Tomorrow is July 1,” read another. “This month marks one year. We still think about you Lonzie. You’ll always be part of our lives.”

The Facebook page, In Memory of Lonzie Barton, has more than 16,000 followers. It is one of about a half a dozen Facebook pages created about the tow-headed toddler.



Provided by the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office

Lonzie Barton was missing for 172 days before his body was found.

In Memory of Lonzie Barton was created by Will and Janet Clark of Perry, about a 2½-hour drive from Jacksonville.

Not only did the Clarks create a page, they lit candles, said prayers and even left their porch light on for the little boy.

“It was real sad,” Will Clark said. “We didn’t know him, but our love for children is so strong.”

That love was ripped apart 10 years ago when Clark’s daughter, Ashlyn “Blaire,” died in her father’s arms. She suffocated after the two of them fell asleep in a reclining chair. Blaire was just 25 days old.

“We wanted our child, and God took away our child and left Lonzie to suffer, to be killed and to be thrown out like he was nothing,” he said. “... I would have taken him and I’m sure other people would have, too. It’s sad.”

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