

opinion

Mark Nusbaum, President
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Editorial board: Those at left, Bobby Martin, editorial
writers Roger Brown and Paula Horvath; also Hank
Coxe, Abubakr Hassan, The Rev. Vaughn McLaughlin,
Tala Reynolds, J.R. Ross and Ron Salem.

A VERSE FOR TODAY

Owe no one anything except to love one
another ...
Romans 13:8

Sales tax means a bright future for city

Take a good look, and you can see the green shoots of a better Jacksonville.

■ Across San Marco and the Southbank, three major projects — including The District, a sprawling, riverfront collection of residences, offices, restaurants, a hotel and more — are scheduled to break ground soon.

■ On Riverside, the glittering Winston Family YMCA, a \$21 million, 72,000-square-foot stunner will promote better health while celebrating our diversity.

■ In Northwest Jacksonville, a vacant and decrepit apartment complex that had long been a symbol of neighborhood blight has been torn down. Now the cleared land is becoming a symbol of opportunity. Payne Avenue Walk will provide modern homes for 12 families.

■ In our corporate community, a bullish momentum is building. Over the course of just two recent days, Citibank and Amazon announced they would bring 800 and 1,500 new jobs, respectively, to Jacksonville.

■ Throughout our city, people are streaming in as new residents. According to recent census figures, Jacksonville has added nearly 45,000 people between 2010 and last year, more than any other Florida city.

■ Based on data collected by Visit Jacksonville, the occupancy rate in local hotels has enjoyed an impressive spike this year — a dramatic uptick that's allowing our city to move up the list of top tourist destinations.

These signs represent the fresh energy that's infusing today's Jacksonville and forming tomorrow's better one.

It is a sense of productive energy that we can't afford to halt or slow.

It is a sense of momentum that Jacksonville's citizens must maintain by approving the Aug. 30 referendum on Mayor Lenny Curry's sales-tax proposal.

CONTRAST IS CLEAR

By approving the referendum — which would simply enable the city to keep collecting a half-penny sales tax beyond 2030, its expiration date — Jacksonville could begin the process of relieving the ever-present weight

around our city's neck: The nearly \$3 billion pension debt that's choking the promise and potential we have to become a truly great American city.

With a few weeks before Election Day, citizens should weigh what's at stake.

Do we want a city, shackled by an unaddressed pension debt, where our infrastructure keeps steadily crumbling around our ears because we can't spare the money to keep updating it?

Or do we want a city where all residents — from the thousands of new ones pouring in to those who have been here for generations — feel genuine excitement about being in a Jacksonville with the fiscal freedom to dream big things?

Do we want a city where the new residents eventually just end up joining so many longtime ones in being disillusioned about what remains unfulfilled and undone in Jacksonville, in part because an opportunity to take a step toward sustainable fiscal stability was flat-out squandered — sacrificed at the altar of short-term thinking?

Or do we want a Jacksonville where more and more exciting projects from San Marco to Payne Avenue — and all points within and beyond — keep taking shape before our eyes?

Do we want a Jacksonville where visitors arrive to see an underwhelming city that's clearly unable to make the necessary investments in resources and vision to be a sustainable tourist hotbed — and leads them to ask, "Why are we here?"

Or do we want a Jacksonville where visitors and companies, now drawn to our community in ever-greater numbers, see a forward-thinking, attractive city that is willing to invest in itself — and compels them to say, "We're glad we're here?"

Nobody likes to vote on a new tax, especially on an issue that should have been resolved long ago. But we all know that there is no easy or painless solution.

We should embrace the reality that the best alternative can only come by voting "Yes" on the Aug. 30 referendum.

REASONS FOR SALES TAX

One-time opportunity: The Legislature will never approve a regular sales tax option. The mayor masterfully lobbied the Legislature and governor to approve the special sales tax option.

Property taxes: Already used in the \$260 million pension bill this year, this option will always be there. Property taxes, however, hit small business hard.

A broader tax: Sales tax revenue will capture revenue from commuters and visitors. Everyone, including renters, benefit from Jacksonville's police and fire protection.

Reform: Revenue can't be used until there is pension reform. The same can't be said for property tax revenue.

Not kicking the can: There is no end to the city's pension obligations. A retiree this year will live several more decades.

A complete solution: Analysis shows that the debt will be fully paid by 2049 when the tax would end.

Trust: Those worried about pension reform should remember that Mayor Lenny Curry is a conservative business owner. He is committed to pensions that are fair, competitive and affordable.

No more delays: The city has been dealing with this crisis since 2008. It has hurt morale among police officers and firefighters. It is time for closure.

Some immediate relief: Don't expect a windfall, but at least the city won't be digging a deeper hole.

No perfect solution: The do nothing option has led us to this huge debt load. Every solution has its issues. The mayor's plan is the best of difficult options.

Coming Sunday: How we got here. Many newcomers especially want to know how this pension debt accumulated.

Sales tax holiday

Make use of special sales tax holiday

Florida's "sales tax holidays" have become a traditional back-to-school event that families plan for, neighbors talk about and businesses promote.

This year's sales tax holiday — from Friday through Sunday — is shorter than last year and does not exempt from taxes some items previously included, such as computers.

But there are few tax breaks that generate such excitement among taxpayers while stimulating business activity with increased advertising and competition.

Florida was among the first states in the nation to create what was called the "Florida Residents' Tax Relief Act" in 1998. Support for renewal has been nearly unanimous among lawmakers. In some years, separate holidays were created for hurricane preparation supplies and energy efficient appliances; in other years, such as during the Great Recession, lawmakers paused the holidays due to financial constraints.

Some back-to-school holidays were as long as 10 days spanning two weekends. That has led to some perception that this year's version is somehow less valuable. There are also claims that the tax break does nothing to stimulate the economy and only shifts spending to different time periods.

This is a unique chance for taxpayers to choose whether to take advantage of a tax break. And the benefits for businesses are evident by the incredible promotion and hoopla surrounding the event.

Were there no benefit to businesses it is unlikely we would see such celebration and investment in advertising from establishments big and small.

Economic arguments aside, there are few tax breaks that resonate more with Floridians while providing a brief lesson in how we pay our taxes. Few Floridians noticed a hike and then a cut in their vehicle registration fees over the past few years. Nor is it likely that consumers noticed last year's modest cut in taxes on services like cell phones and cable TV.

But the sales tax holiday provides savings that Floridians actually consider and discuss. Appropriately for the kick-off of the school year, it's a teachable moment about how the sales tax affects us in our everyday purchases.

Dominic Calabro, CEO, Florida TaxWatch, Tallahassee

Another view: Steve Kelley Creators Syndicate



Letters from Readers

REPLY: CURRY AND TRUMP How about Brown and Clinton?

In his recent column, Ron Littlepage declared that Mayor Lenny Curry was showing his true colors by attending a Donald Trump rally in Jacksonville.

I agree. You are known by the company you keep.

It reminds me of Mayor Alvin Brown's close associations with President Bill Clinton.

Ron is right about riding coattails. They are two swell fellows.

Meaning Donald and Bill, or did he mean Lenny and Alvin?

Rob Richardson, Jacksonville Beach

TRUMP'S STATEMENTS Democrats are getting to him

Donald Trump is letting the Democrats do a rope-a-dope on him.

When the Democrats put up the Muslim parents of the fallen soldier to criticize him, he should have expressed sympathy for the parents and then excoriated the Hillary Clinton campaign for using the emotions of the grieving parents for political gain and probably coaching the father on what to say.

This would have changed the whole story by showing him as the compassionate candidate and the Clinton campaign as doing anything to gain advantage.

He should listen to his team and engage his brain before putting his mouth in gear.

Kenneth Dougherty, Jacksonville

STATE ATTORNEY Representing everyone

This is in response to the letter writer who stated: "The Office of State Attorney should be nonpartisan. The office is intended to represent all ..."

I thought all people elected to government positions from the president on down were to represent all their constituents once they take office.

Rich Horvath, Ponte Vedra

REPLY: MEDICARE FOR ALL A physician's view

Jack Bernard stated in his column supporting single-payer health care that "most waste is caused by politicians skirting their responsibilities due to interest groups and political pressures."

News flash: Where government goes, politics follows.

I had difficulty believing that he actually claimed the administrative costs for Medicare were 3 percent!

I have never read a claim that low, and there is no way it includes the number of people working in billing in health care offices.

The ratio has to be at least two staffers for every three physicians, and every one of the staffers is there due to insurance and government regulations.

Next time anyone goes to a physician, find out the number of staffers that are needed. You will be flabbergasted.

Your taxes and premiums go to their salaries. It has skyrocketed under Medicare.

One hospital in Rhode Island went from two vice-presidents to 17 in the first 15 years of Medicare and Medicaid alone. This is only likely to get worse under a single-payer system.

Anyone who advocates a single-payer system for medical care should first have to put up with it in his own occupation and industry. Then you can experience it for yourself.

Roderick T. Beaman, osteopath, Jacksonville

OUTDOORS EVENT News coverage criticized

This past weekend's Shooting and Outdoor Convention was a chance to establish a regional trade show in Jacksonville. This is why we have a bed tax.

Rather than push the event and help support a local business trying to get off the ground, the Times-Union chose to focus on past allegations of misconduct that were dismissed and never proven.

We constantly hear about a need to support tourism and downtown development. This event was doing both.

The city and this paper should have done much more to support a fledgling event.

Jon McGowan brought in national retailers and a great series of speakers and candidates for office.

The Times-Union, however, focused on everything but the event itself and took every opportunity to derail this event.

I am disappointed.

Eric Friday, Jacksonville

OBAMA'S ENDORSEMENT Judgment questioned

James Comey, the director of the FBI, after an exhaustive review of the private email system set up by Hillary Clinton while she was secretary of state, concluded that she was reckless and negligent in her handling of important classified information.

He then testified to Congress that she had lied repeatedly about the handling of classified information, about turning over all work-related emails and how her attorneys reviewed the emails that were deleted from those servers.

She then went on Fox News Sunday and disagreed about what the director had determined.

President Barack Obama then endorsed her for president, calling her the most prepared person ever to run for the office.

Donald Trump made some negative remarks about a Muslim immigration attorney who went to the DNC convention and used his son's death in service in the Middle East to disparage Trump's stance on immigration from countries embroiled in Islamic terrorism.

For these comments, the president declares that Trump is not fit to be president.

I have to question the president's judgment and his fitness to declare who should be the next president.

John Serb, St. Johns

LETTER POLICY

Letters of about 200 words are preferred. Letters are edited for space, clarity and newspaper style. All letters should include a name, address, occupation and telephone number for confirmation.

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