

viewpoint

Pro: Sales tax is best option for future

point of view

eric smith

This seems a particularly opportune time for a former elected official like myself, a Democrat with a modicum of institutional

knowledge, to weigh in on the ballot initiative of Mayor Lenny Curry.

He has proposed to provide at least a partial answer to the overwhelming pension debt now looming over the city of Jacksonville and our taxpayers.

I remain very appreciative of the confidence placed in me by the voters who elected me three times to the Florida House of Representatives and for 20 years to the City Council where my colleagues elected me twice as president. It was also an honor to be elected as president of the Florida League of Cities.

PENSIONS, POTHoles AREN'T PARTISAN

One of the joys I had when I was in office was working without regard to partisan politics or pre-election posturing to get things done. That's not going to change today. Pensions, public safety, problems and potholes don't reside in any one political party. It's also not productive to look back on what might have been or throw stones when at last there is at least a viable plan as a significant part of a pension debt solution on the table.

That said, I cannot let it be ignored that when we left the City Council in 1999, my colleagues and the mayor left all of the city pension plans in exceedingly good shape. Run the numbers; check the facts. But that was then; this is now.

A fascinating quote I found from President Woodrow Wilson says a lot: "The way to stop financial joy-riding is to arrest the chauffeur, not the automobile."

Let that sink in. The chauffeurs, however, are all gone to other elected offices or other pursuits, and the mayor, Council President Lori Boyer and the council have inherited the pension automobile that now looks a lot more like a long-haul semi-truck full of debt.

Talk is cheap about how we got here, who gets the blame and who has the best plan.

After 12 years and two mayors and assorted council members, no legislative proposal survived scrutiny, study groups, politics, potential vetoes and court battles. Nobody set the table for a solution.

COUNCIL, LEGISLATURE APPROVED IT

Enter Curry. With a seasoned team of professionals, including veterans Sam Mousa, Mike Weinstein and Kerri Stewart, all trusted by at least four previous mayors, this mayor devised and presented a plan discussed in many town hall meetings, opened in the sunshine and approved by the City Council and legislative delegation unanimously as I recall.

Then it was hand-carried by the mayor relentlessly through the process in the Florida Legislature, which approved it overwhelmingly to place it on the ballot and let voters decide.

Seems to me most all of those players were elected. So when a couple of other former council presidents call that "taxation without representation," it just doesn't, at least for me, conjure up that

Compromise was how the mayor got here. Consensus was a realistic building block.

vision of our founders tossing tea into Boston Harbor.

Purposely I leave out numbers, projections, debt service calculations and actuarial projections. Suffice it to say, those have been worked to death, and different sources come to different conclusions because of the many variables in any proposal like this.

Most folks have seen those and will draw their own conclusions. Here's what is irrefutable. The referendum is the only plan in play right now after 12 years. That's a hard, cold fact.

And they whine about gridlock in Washington? It's amazing we even have a solution available on the ballot. It had to be eyeballed and voted on by 181 elected officials to get placed there.

NOT PERFECT, BUT BEST AVAILABLE

Is it the best plan? Not necessarily in my judgment. Were there better options? Arguably always. But the cost of a negative vote and the delay involved in getting anything done to carve down this debt is not a pretty picture for this city in the near term and beyond.

Reasonable people will differ, and some oppose the referendum on grounds that it will saddle our children with debt.

I love my kids and grandkids, too, but the suggestion that debt can somehow be avoided and we should shoot down this plan as a favor to the next generation is a bit ludicrous.

Put me on the record here. I fear for those I love, not a continued half-penny on the sales tax, but rather a city with the prospect of yet another murder because we can't put sufficient police boots on the ground, a life lost because our firefighters needed better equipment, infrastructure that needs repair right now and kids and crime victims who will not get help because funding wasn't there.

The pension sales tax extension provides a way forward. It also creates options for freeing up current dollars to get things done we so sorely need.

Compromise was how the mayor got here. Consensus was a realistic building block. The ballot on Aug. 30, is important. For those former councilmen who fear "backlash" for expressing an opinion, please spare me the drama.

President Herbert Hoover once said "Honest differences of views and honest debate are not disunity. They are the vital process of policy making among free people."

My strong suspicion is the price of waiting for the political moons to align and a perfect solution to emerge is substantially higher on this generation and the next than voting yes on Curry's action plan, which is what I plan to do.

Eric Smith is a Jacksonville attorney, former Florida legislator (1972-78) and City Councilman-at-large (1979-99).

Con: Mayor is using Trump's playbook

point of view

p. stanford

Wow. Despite his "One City, One Jacksonville" opening act, we all knew that Lenny Curry was a political

operative and backroom dealmaker as head of the Florida Republican Party.

He has largely been given a pass by the news media throughout his first year as mayor. But his true colors and rank partisanship are now on full display.

Not only did he rousingly take the stage with Donald Trump, he seems to have taken a page straight out of the Trump playbook:

Rule No. 1: Use fear, half-truths and intimidation to promote your plan.

Curry uses fear-mongering that "we'll end up like Detroit" when he knows this is untrue and state law would prohibit a bankruptcy when we have one of the lowest millage rates in the state.

At the same time, he threatens that all city services are subject to severe budget cuts unless his pension sales tax plan is passed. His claim that it would take a 30 percent property tax increase to solve the debt problem is untrue and just another scare tactic.

Rule No. 2: Insult and attack anyone who opposes your plan.

Former City Council Presidents Stephen Joost and Bill Bishop are just the latest examples of officials and experts criticizing his plan, yet he says "they were part of the problem" and insulted them as showing a "lack of understanding." Obviously, Curry's idea of the "bully pulpit" is to use it to be a bully.

Rule No. 3: Refuse to answer questions, provide specifics or demonstrate effectiveness of your plan.

Curry consistently refuses to answer questions about the details of his plan though we do know that it requires collective bargaining and the closing of at least one of the current pension plans. How do we know the unions will agree?

Why wouldn't this be done first before asking voters to approve another tax? And exactly how does his plan "put this issue in our rearview mirror" as his supporters' statements claim?

Curry consistently refuses to answer questions about the details of his plan.

Rule: Let others pay for your plan.

Curry's plan simply kicks the can, yet again, to our children and grandchildren, well, at least those of them who will stick around in a city that can't fund basic services or provide them any quality of life while throwing millions at a losing football franchise.

The pension sales tax plan is only the most publicized example of Curry's lack of leadership and transparency. Let's not forget his sheepish refusal to back a Human Rights Ordinance that every modern city in the country has passed.

And his most recent sleight of hand: taking \$4.6 million from required downtown redevelopment funds to use in his budget, saying his office "wasn't aware of the requirement." This from an administration headed by a supposedly business savvy CPA and one that can't or won't come up with the money to support downtown's Hemming Park.

Let's be realistic. The only intended beneficiary of Curry's plan is his political resume. In his all-too-certain future campaigns for elected office, he can claim he solved the city's pension crisis with his strong "leadership"! After all, he'll likely have moved on to bigger and better things (Legislature? Congress? Governor?) long before the tax even takes effect.

But what kind of leader asks the public to approve a tax that won't begin for 14 years and will actually increase the pension costs that we pass on to the next generation(s) without giving specific details and proof that it will work?

We should vote No on Referendum No. 1 and force our elected officials to act as real leaders to find a timely and pragmatic solution to the pension crisis instead of shirking their responsibility for fear of spending some of their political capital.

P. Stanford is retired and living in Jacksonville.

reason midweek

Columnist is off the fence on new tax



ron littlepage

times-union columnist

With early voting under way in advance of the Aug. 30 election, opinions are coming fast and furious about Mayor Lenny Curry's plan for a new sales tax to deal with the city's pension debt.

Readers of this column know that I've been sitting on the fence on this issue. That's no longer acceptable. It's decision time.

There are many reasons I will be voting no.

Curry keeps describing his plan as "tough medicine" when in fact it's simply kicking the can down the road, so that future generations will pay off the pension debt that we've allowed to accumulate.

The new sales tax wouldn't even be collected until 2031 when the current half cent sales tax being used to finance the Better Jacksonville Plan must end by law.

If you have an 8-year-old child or grandchild, about the time they graduate from college, they will be handed a tax bill along with their diplomas if they choose to live in Jacksonville.

In the meantime, you will have skated for 14 years. More like a spoon full of sugar than tough medicine.

Curry also insists that his plan is the only workable option.

He ignores another one. A one mill increase in the property tax rate would raise about \$50 million next year.

That money, plus continuing to collect the extra mill in future years, would begin paying down the debt now instead of waiting 14 years.

Additional savings from benefit changes negotiated with the city's unions, such as those the police and firefighters agreed to earlier under Mayor Alvin Brown's administration, could help solve the problem more quickly than the 2060 final deadline included in Curry's plan.

Curry would counter that there is no way to guarantee future mayors or city councils would continue to collect an extra mill to pay down the pension debt.

Who knows what the economy is go-

ing to be five years from now, much less 14 years?

That's another reason it's wise to begin paying down the debt now.

Under Curry's plan, the police and firefighters, the correctional officers and the general employees unions could still end up with defined benefit plans.

If that happens, which is likely for at least the police and firefighters, lucrative benefits could be negotiated in the future that would put us back in the same mess we are in today.

The way to stop that is to elect mayors and City Council members who are wise enough to not let that happen again.

And that's the same answer to Curry's concern about a millage rate increase being abandoned. Elect wise leaders who will do what's right.

The issue that solidified knocking me off the fence and into the no column is this:

If Curry's new sales tax passes, we won't have the option of approving a half-cent sales tax for capital improvements until 2031.

It's that kind of work that the sales tax has been used for traditionally, such as BJP.

After Curry leaves office, the next mayors won't have the sales tax option to improve the city's infrastructure, which is lacking and will only get worse.

Even when 2031 finally arrives, only a half cent will be available instead of the full one cent that could be used if a half cent wasn't being spent to reduce pension debt.

I haven't liked the way Curry has tried to sell his plan — making ridiculous comparisons to Detroit and attacking those who have disagreed with him.

It would have been a more productive use of time to have an inclusive conversation about how to meet all of the city's needs — pension debt, failing infrastructure, neighborhoods that have been neglected, downtown redevelopment — and come up with an overall plan.

That didn't happen. I'm voting no on Aug. 30.

ron.littlepage@jacksonville.com (904) 359-4284

National increase in police being shot

Donald Trump said in an Aug. 4 rally in Portland, Maine, that "they're shooting our police at record levels."

The facts: The record for police firearm deaths, and deaths of officers overall, in recent decades was set in the 1970s, FactCheck.org's research found.

But Trump was correct when he went on to say those shootings were up 50 percent or "much higher than that from last year." Figures from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund show 32 firearm fatalities of law enforcement officers as of July 20 this year, compared with 18 at that point in 2015.

The highest number of firearm-related fatalities at the midpoint of the year occurred in 1973 when 84 law enforcement officers were killed with a gun. These numbers come from the Memorial Fund's report for 2016.

The number of shooting deaths of officers in



FACT CHECK

Want something checked out?

If you see or hear about something that needs a Fact Check, email carole.fader@jacksonville.com

2016 — a year in which five officers were killed by a sniper in Dallas and three officers were shot and killed in Baton Rouge the same month — is substantially higher than the number for the first half of 2015. But it's not a "record level."

The Memorial Fund report also gives averages for firearm-related deaths at the midpoint by decade. That average for the 1970s was 63; in the 1980s, it was 44. By the 2010 decade, it had dropped to an average of 26. So the 32 firearm fatalities for the first half of 2016 are higher than the average for the 2010 decade but lower than what we've seen in decades past, FactCheck.

org reports.

FactCheck.org notes that the 1970s were an especially deadly time for law enforcement. In looking at deaths from all causes since 1956, the highest number occurred in 1974 with 280 law enforcement deaths.

The National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund also provided FactCheck.org with data going back to 1920 on officer deaths involving a criminal act, including shootings, but also deaths involving other weapons or vehicle crashes or strikings.

That data shows the record year for felonious deaths was 1930 with 196 deaths. The yearly numbers went down for several decades, then rose again in the 1970s, to 170 in 1973, declining again after that. A spike occurred in 2001 due to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Through July 20, 2016, there have been 46 felonious deaths of law enforcement officers this year.

Can we believe Trump or Clinton?

point of view

letters in brief

A

writer stated,

"It's

sad that so many Americans with access to a decent public education actually believe what Trump says."

Are you kidding? How can any American with a single brain cell believe anything Hillary says?

Dayle Vickery, Orange Park

TRUMP'S FLAT HUMOR

What do Donald Trump and Alicia Silverstone have in common? Alicia played the lead in "Clueless," and Trump leads a truly clueless life

How many times does he have to be told to stop the sarcasm? Can someone please tell him that his attempts at humor are just not funny?

He might have a "big brain," but he has no sense of humor

Scott Schleifer, Jacksonville

POLITICAL ONE-LINERS

■ Bernie Sanders had a tough assignment. He had to endorse the very individual and party that cheated him out of the nomination. And he did.

■ The media repeatedly questions Melania Trump about the way her husband treats women. But the very same media never questions Chelsea Clinton about how her father treats women. Why?

■ Democrats went into a snit when Donald Trump requested Russian hackers turn over Hillary Clinton's 30,000 deleted emails. They claimed it was a national security issue. But didn't Hillary Clinton swear that the 30,000 emails were strictly personal, involving her yoga schedule and her daughter's wedding? Apparently Democrats want it both ways.

Michael Pelt, Jacksonville

THE GOP SPLIT

Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Mitt Romney and Jeb Bush are hurting the rest of the GOP candidates on the ballot by not supporting Donald Trump.

The reason is there would not be straight voting for the Republican Party.

Democrats are thrilled while Republicans are stupid.

Jean Winters, Ponte Vedra Beach

JUSTICE

Last week a college male who raped a drunken coed was only sentenced to two years of spending the night in jail, free to go to work and school.

By contrast, the Times-Union reports, "Man gets 4 years for using a torch to burn a dog."

That is four years in prison.

Seems backward

C.B. Roberts, Jacksonville