

viewpoint

OPINIONS PAGE BLOG

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Healthy JCCI is a key for a quality city

point of view

crooks, swain and chepenik

and creativity.

The three of us, with more than 40 years of observing and participating in Jacksonville's changes, would like to comment on the city's character.

For starters, cities often need "a shot in the arm" to get in motion.

For Jacksonville, this "shot" came in 1968 with city/county consolidation replacing an expensive, corrupt, patronage-ridden city government with a new form designed to be more efficient, honest and serving more of its peoples.

Under the leadership of the first mayor, of consolidated Jacksonville, Hans Tanzler, Jr., his Chief Operating Officer Lex Hester and an outstanding City Council (including for the first time four African American members), Jacksonville entered the 1970s with great plans for developing downtown, cleaning up our rivers, improving city services and modernizing our infrastructure.

Substantial changes resulted.

Community leaders also looked to sustaining their efforts through an Amelia Island Conference in 1974 that led to the creation of Leadership Jacksonville, Volunteer Jacksonville (now HandsOn Jacksonville) and Jacksonville Community Council Inc.

JCCI's charge was to engage local citizenry with important community issues to find solutions for a more livable city.

JCCI has served that purpose for more than 40 years. It has enlisted the time and talents of hundred, if not thousands of citizens to study issues of health care, race relations, education and beyond to find answers to questions of how our city can work better. Studies have led to programs such as Communities in Schools, The Bridge, public kindergartens, neighborhood health clinics, civil service reform, tree ordinances, conflict resolution and even pension reform.

The results have produced multiple layers of benefits for Jacksonville:

- Effective recruitment, training and networking among civic leaders.
- Intensive engagement of leaders and involved citizens within a consensus building, nonpartisan, think-tank setting.

■ And well-informed, practical and often innovative proposals that have produced measurable results.

In the 1980s JCCI introduced Quality of Life Indicators to show how the city was doing in public safety, economic development, health care, education, race relations and other areas.

These indicators told community leaders where we were heading in the right direction and where we needed to make changes. They also brought JCCI national and international recognition."

In 1991, JCCI created "JCCI Forward" to build sustainability by recruiting and training young leaders. Recognizing the city's fundamental challenges with race relations, JCCI undertook two groundbreaking studies examining the needs of "Young Black Males," and later "Improving Race Relations."

Many studies measurably improved our quality of life. Equally important, the studies increasingly won the support of City Hall, the School Board, United Way and JAX Chamber.

The studies enabled all local citizens to have a voice in solving problems and developing policies for the Bold New City.

JCCI has been a consistent stimulus for progressive urban change. It has confronted city issues piece by piece in search of and proposing solutions. Certainly, there are still many issues that cry out for attention. Unfortunately, JCCI's resources have become depleted in recent years.

Much public and private funding has ceased, in part due to the Great Recession. The question becomes this: Can the organization reinvent itself and regain its vitality to continue to confront community problems in a nonpartisan way moving the needle forward toward making Jacksonville a world class city that is inclusive for all of its people?

Jacksonville already has valuable tools and experiences we can build on to create the new Jacksonville that Denton envisions.

All we have to do is re-energize and support what we already have, including JCCI.

■ Lois Chepenik, former executive director, JCCI.

■ David Swain, former deputy director and research director, JCCI.

■ Jim Crooks, UNF professor emeritus and long term board member, JCCI.

Broken promises and the pension tax



tonyaa weathersbee
times-union columnist

It's hard to take a drive through parts of Northwest Jacksonville and miss all the signs urging people to vote yes on the expanded sales tax.

They line desolate lots along U.S. 1.

They appear along

sidewalks outside of subsidized housing projects on Moncrief Road and along other streets on this side of town where the infrastructure and economics haven't improved much since voters approved the Better Jacksonville half-cent sales tax in 2000.

Yet people who live in and around this area are being told that the only way their fortunes will improve is if they vote for more of the same.

In fact, literature circulating in the area promises that if the referendum passes, it will provide immediate relief in the budget for infrastructure projects and treat every neighborhood in every ZIP code equally.

History makes it tough for me to buy that.

And while Mayor Lenny Curry is right when he says that extending the Better Jacksonville half-cent sales tax beyond 2030 is a solution to addressing the staggering debt the unfunded pension presents — mainly around \$1.65 billion in unfunded liability for the Police and Fire Pension Fund — it is unfortunately a solution that struggling people will have to foot disproportionately with no real guarantee that their communities will improve substantially as a result.

First of all, no matter how one slices it, sales taxes are regressive taxes.

According to a 2015 report by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a nonprofit, non-partisan research organization that examines issues of tax fairness and sustainability, Florida has the second most regressive tax structure in the nation.

In this state, the poorest people pay 12.9 percent of their income on taxes while middle-income earners pay 8.3 percent of their income on taxes and top earners pay 1.9 percent.

That happens because Florida, as well as its cities and counties, rely heavily on sales taxes to fuel half to two-thirds of

There is no easy answer to the pension crisis. But right now, I don't believe the half-cent sales tax is the answer.

its tax revenue.

Because sales taxes only apply to spent money and not saved money and because low-income earners have to spend more of their meager income for basics than wealthier people, they wind up poorer as a result.

This is true in spite of the fact that groceries and medicine are exempt from sales taxes.

Now I get that the tax, if approved, won't be collected until 2031. But as my colleague Ron Littlepage recently pointed out, younger generations will be saddled with that bill.

"It definitely is unusual to be talking about a tax that won't kick in for more than a decade," Carl Davis, research director for the tax policy institute, told me.

"The problem is that this is a decision that is being made today that could impact people quite differently tomorrow. If incomes continue to drop, then they will have to spend even more of their income on necessities."

That means that if Northwest Jacksonville continues to deteriorate, its younger generations will have to pay a disproportionate amount of that tax while not necessarily seeing anything around them improve as a result.

Which means that in 2031, they could find themselves paying for their own oppression.

There is no easy answer to the pension crisis.

But right now, I don't believe the half-cent sales tax is the answer.

Because even though the pension burden is hobbling the progress of the entire city, it is still unfair for the poorest people to face a future where they will have to shoulder most of the cost to remove that burden.

And risk seeing more broken promises and more broken communities.

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