

viewpoint

HRO is needed to attract business

point of view
darnell smith

As we grow our local economy and build on our strength as a top destination for sporting events, we must be a city that is open and welcoming to everyone.

I believe that we already are that city. But it is time to tell the rest of the country we will not tolerate discrimination of any kind. We can do that by passing an expanded Human Rights Ordinance that protects our LGBT residents and visitors from discrimination.

The bill in City Council is a Jacksonville solution to an issue we care deeply about. It ensures that no one who lives here or visits here will be discriminated against. The bill also protects religious liberties and freedoms, as well as exempts businesses with fewer than 15 employees.

The city's current ordinance code prevents discrimination in the areas of housing, employment and public accommodations based on race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age and disability. The proposed bill, 2017-15, simply amends our current Human Rights Ordinance to add "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to the list.

Top collegiate sporting events are part of the fabric of our community as a great boost to our local economy and as part of the outstanding quality of life here in Jacksonville. Last year, the NCAA enacted a new anti-discrimination policy for cities bidding on collegiate championships.

After listing the name of the bidding city, the very first question reads: Has your city, county/parish and/or state passed anti-discrimination laws that are applicable to all people?

Today, if Jacksonville was bidding on an NCAA event, the answer would regrettably be no. That must change.

The Jacksonville Sports Council, the nonprofit organization charged with attracting major sporting events to Jacksonville, unanimously voted last month to support 2017-15. We've also seen Jacksonville Jaguars owner Shad Khan publicly support the proposal.

It isn't just the NCAA that is asking. Companies looking to invest and expand in Jacksonville are asking about this issue. Yes, we've been incredibly successful attracting business and investment to Jacksonville in recent years. But passing an anti-discrimination bill can help us reach our full potential.

Employers want to know they are investing in a city where all of their employees are protected from discrimination wherever they work and play beyond just their work environment. This expanded Human Rights Ordinance would do that.

An expanded Human Rights Ordinance is also a major issue for the younger workforce. Our local colleges and universities are developing and producing bright, young emerging leaders. We want to keep that talent right here in Jacksonville and this is one of the quality of life issues that millennials are looking for in our city.

This bill is a collaboration between business, civic and faith leaders that will protect everyone in our community from discrimination while respecting religious freedoms and liberties.

We must pass an expanded Human Rights Ordinance to ensure no one is discriminated against in our community and send a message to the rest of the country that no matter who you are, where you are from or who you love, everyone is welcome in Jacksonville, Florida!

Note to readers: A City Council committee has amended the bill to exempt business with fewer than 50 employees under the employment provisions.

Darnell Smith is 2017 JAX Chamber chair.

HRO is a major threat to small business

point of view
philip wemhoff
roger gannam

The LGBT preferential rights bill before City Council is being peddled using disinformation and outright trickery.

It is not the compromise promised by sponsors, but a far more dangerous and deceptive ordinance than ever proposed.

SCARE TACTICS SCAM

Supporters misleadingly claim the economy is weakened when LGBT laws are absent. Exactly the opposite has happened. The Jacksonville Business Journal reports that, in the 12 months following rejection of the 2012 law, Jacksonville saw "the greatest economic improvement [of any city] in the entire country," becoming "the strongest economy in Florida," stronger than all HRO-adopting cities.

HRO sponsors claim deceptively that companies have bypassed Jacksonville, because it lacks this law. When asked to name one company that rejected Jacksonville, bill sponsor Aaron Bowman said "I'm not at liberty to say." But during the 2016 ordinance debate, he confessed: "The companies won't tell us."

The same hoax resurfaced this year but JAX Chamber spokesman Darnell Smith rejected it: "We can't tell you that there's ever been a situation in which they said to us: 'We will not come here on this issue alone'..."

Yet the Chamber wants Jacksonville to buy protection from LGBT enforcers, hoping the city will then be favored by sporting events, which, the Chamber contends, are "part of the fabric of our community." Isn't moral courage the better part of that fabric?

Instead of standing up to this nationwide bully movement as our courageous forefathers would, HRO backers have become bully collaborators. They tell us: Appear the extortionists; surrender to the bullies; sell your soul for 20 pieces of silver. Such cowardice is dishonorable and it guarantees never-ending blackmail.

MENACE TO SMALL BUSINESS

This law will inflict unnecessary lawsuits and government intrusion on business. One "rights" complaint could easily exceed \$20,000 in legal defense fees alone, producing financial ruin.

In addition, the "offender" could suffer fines or, until he complies, court-ordered incarceration, endangering his company's survival.

Further, the 15-employee exemption applies only to employment, giving no protection to any business — regardless of size — from the HRO's public accommodation and bathroom and locker room

provisions.

Businesses must let men claiming womanhood use women's facilities. And questioning whether a man's female identity is "consistent, uniform and sincerely held" risks discrimination actions.

Managers face personal and company liability for challenging men entering women's and girls' facilities, and for any crime from letting the wrong man enter.

Protected individuals may undertake any action, mannerism, appearance, gesture, language or attire that they alone deem "expressions" of their lifestyles.

Sponsors won't reveal the ever-changing "expressions" that businesses must tolerate to avoid prosecution, making them sitting ducks for lawsuits.

Businesses must police the free speech of employees and customers or suffer costly discrimination complaints. Even using the wrong gender pronoun may be actionable.

Businesses will be forced to participate in celebrating LGBT lifestyles regardless of the owners' religious opposition.

LGBTs will receive preferences in hiring, layoffs and housing disputes.

"The Chamber board's HRO-backing doesn't represent its 3,000 members," says 40-year Chamber member Bennett Brown, a banker: "I've arranged loans for thousands of small businesses over 40 years; they don't want this law."

COUNCIL VOTES ON NONEXISTENT BILL

Bill sponsors haven't informed the public that City Council will vote sight unseen on an ordinance that won't be written until many weeks later. If it's enacted, city attorneys get unlimited power to write the final code to be inflicted on Jacksonville in a process called "finalization and codification ... without further Council action".

And to disguise this 2017 HRO as "new" and "simple," the bill scarcely mentions that 29 sections of existing code will change without showing how — and it fails to resolve significant conflicts with existing laws.

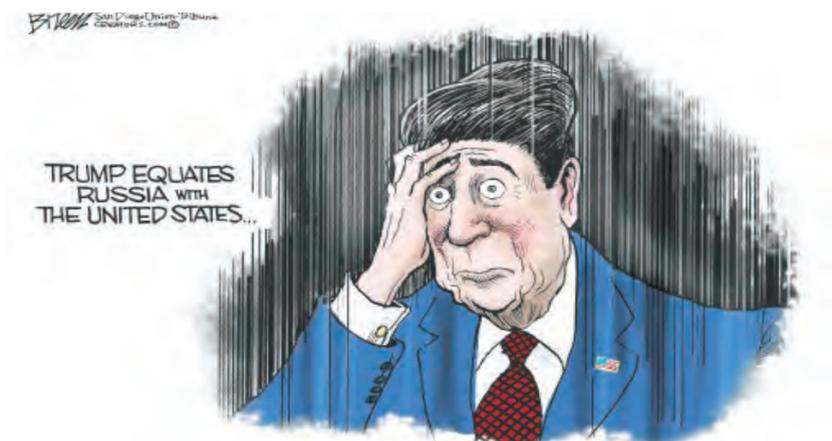
This bill is the embodiment of fraud and trickery.

Voters are tired of being told they're too ignorant to comprehend this fake "human rights" crisis, which is designed to gain LGBT power, victim status, special privilege and acceptance and to suppress criticism while curbing the rights of others.

Learn how Jacksonville is booming without an HRO: tinyurl.com/JaxEconomy.

Attorney Roger K. Gannam represents Legal Affairs for Liberty Counsel. Philip Wemhoff of Jacksonville represents DefendJaxFamilies.

Another view: Steve Breen San Diego Union-Tribune



reason midweek

Looks like downtown is about to bloom



ron littlepage
times-union
columnist

Although plans for Jacksonville's downtown are often announced with great fanfare before fading into nothing but a distant memory, maybe this time will be different.

Word came last week that another plan is in the works to redevelop the Laura Street Trio and the Barnett Bank building.

The Downtown Investment Authority signed off on the \$79 million project proposed by The Molasky Group of Las Vegas and Southeast Group of Jacksonville.

Call me an easily bamboozled optimist if you like — that's certainly been the case with other ideas to salvage these historic buildings — but this time I think it's going to work.

As the DIA pointed out, unlike in the past, there's a development team in place that has the expertise and the financial wherewithal to get the job done.

For its part, the DIA agreed to provide \$4 million from the city's historic preservation trust fund, which was created many years ago with the Laura Street Trio in mind.

The City Council will also be asked to provide another \$4 million grant as well as \$1.8 million in property tax refunds.

None of the money would be released until the buildings are ready for occupancy, a key safeguard to protect the city's money.

With the momentum that is already building downtown, the completion of this project would be huge.

At present the Laura Street Trio resembles bombed-out buildings left over from a war.

That doesn't exactly speak well for what is the heart of downtown.

Restoring the four buildings to vibrant commercial, residential and office space would remove that blot from downtown's future.

Who knows, if this is successful, that success could spread to other long talked about projects.

Let's start with The Jacksonville Landing, another anchor for downtown that has grown old and tired.

Plans to remake the Landing have had more iterations than the Jaguars had losses this past season.

In a city that is made up of distinct neighborhoods, downtown is everyone's neighborhood.

It doesn't help that one of the principal owners of the Landing, Toney Sleiman, carries political baggage with him.

Mayor John Peyton and Sleiman weren't exactly friends. After Peyton's two terms in office, Sleiman was a big supporter of Mike Hogan, who lost his mayoral race to Alvin Brown.

Then Sleiman became a big supporter of Brown, who lost his re-election bid to Mayor Lenny Curry, and we've all seen how Curry deals with his political enemies.

If there are any hard feelings, they need to be put aside. Finding a workable answer to the Landing is also critical to downtown's success.

Then we could really get on a roll.

The DIA is seeking proposals for development of the Shipyards property and Metropolitan Park with Jaguars owner Shad Khan expected to be a main contender to develop the area around the sports and entertainment district.

On downtown's Southbank, the District is taking shape.

As I said, go ahead and call me an easily bamboozled optimist, but I can see all of these things happening.

And that would be a game changer for Jacksonville.

The anti-downtown crowd won't admit it, but having a vibrant downtown is a critical part of securing Jacksonville's future and the ability to attract good jobs and talented people.

It's also important because in a city that is made up of distinct neighborhoods, downtown is everyone's neighborhood. It's the place we can come together and share common bonds and common experiences.

This has been said over and over, but it's worth repeating.

Every great city has a great downtown.

Jacksonville is on the verge of making great strides in that direction.

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

Pork hasn't been banned from prisons

Social media email claims that the federal government has removed bacon, pork chops, pork links, ham and all other pig products from prisons because of an outcry from Muslims.

The facts: Pork was discontinued because inmates rated pork very low in a food survey.

But the "ban" didn't last long and roast pork was returned to the menus.

The Washington Post reported on Oct. 9, 2015, that the move had nothing to do with religious dietary restrictions (Muslim or Jewish) and was solely about prisoners' distaste for pork.

The Post story said that the Bureau of Prisons, which feeds inmates three meals a day at 122 federal penitentiaries, based its decision on surveys of prisoners' food preferences.

Prison menus added a turkey bacon substitute, the Post said.

Observant Muslims and Jews are forbidden to



FACT CHECK

Want something checked out? If you see or

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

eat pork, and the prison system has long made accommodations for them by providing alternatives to pork and halal and kosher foods.

Ross told the Post that the presence of Muslim prisoners was not a motivating factor in the disappearance of pork.

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, told FoxNews.com that while the council welcomed the ban, it did not request it.

But as NPR, Fox News and other outlets reported, the pork industry had an almost immediate outcry of its own.

"We find it hard to believe that a survey would have found a majority of

any population saying,

'No thanks, I don't want any bacon,' " a representative for The National Pork Producers Council told Fox News.

Sen. Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican, is chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which oversees the federal prison system.

He also represents the top pork-producing state; Iowa farmers raise more than 20 million hogs a year.

Grassley fired off a letter to Bureau of Prisons Director Charles E. Samuels Jr., questioning the "ban," the surveys and the cost issue.

After receiving the letter, the bureau quickly reversed its decision. The Post reported that only roast pork would be back on the menu.

Numerous blog headlines reported the pork controversy as "Obama Administration Bans All Pork Products from Prison Menus," but there is no evidence that the Obama administration did that.

Brief Letters: Guns, kids and parents

The front-page article in Friday's Times-Union was titled "Guns found in schools: Parents question security."

The article indicated that a lack of security is the problem with kids having guns in the schools. I submit that the problem is due to the parent or parents of these adolescents allowing them to have access to these guns.

When an adolescent commits any misdemeanor, the parent should be held responsible. Don't blame lack of security for this, but consider the lack of parenting. Hold the parents responsible for their children's actions.

Reuel Platt Jr., Atlantic Beach

REFUGEE BAN

The seven nations at the forefront of this "Muslim ban," are from a directive by then-President Barack Obama.

Derick Brundick, Jacksonville

HOUSTON AND HRO

Last year Houston voters defeated an HRO ordinance for their city. Lo and behold, the 51st Super Bowl was held there. But HRO advocates tell us this is not possible. What gives?

Roger Cable, Jacksonville

ANSWERING KEILLOR

Garrison Keillor stated in a recent column that Vice President Mike Pence is a radical pro-lifer. Really?

What is radical about having care and compassion for the most innocent and vulnerable of children? Children who have a heartbeat and have tiny hands and feet. Maybe someone who lacks a conscience considers that radical. Is that what Keillor lacks, among other things?

Calvin Johnson, Jacksonville

PROTEST PEACEFULLY

Peaceful protests are fundamental to our democracy. The recent Women's March in Washington is a good example.

However, since when did hooded extremists become acceptable? Since when were police told to step down in the face of faceless cowards?

Like it or not, we need a law-and-order president and mayors.

Ken Gorman, Ponte Vedra Beach