

# OPINION

## The Times-Union

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### OUR VIEW

# For JEA, future shock is here

By Times-Union Editorial Board

It is necessary to put the sales talk of JEA on the back burner. Jacksonville Jaguars owner Shad Khan opposed a sale while civic leader Preston Haskell wrote a column in last week's Reason section in opposition. Mayor Lenny Curry promised not to call for JEA privatization.

A full, fair and thorough evaluation of the merits of selling JEA never happened.

It was torpedoed by opposition of employee unions, political opponents of the mayor and a lack of transparency regarding the origin of the discussion.

Mayor Lenny Curry said little other than he had no position on the sale.

The typical reaction of Jacksonville residents to a sale was immediate opposition.

That's understandable given the important role JEA has played in Jacksonville life. One major role has been as the golden goose for city finances, resulting in the current \$116 million contribution to the city's budget. That's the equivalent of more than 2 mills in property taxes or over 10 percent of the \$1 billion city annual budget.

City Councilman John Crescimbeni, who has been chairing a special City Council committee on the sale of JEA, has suggested that the committee's title be changed to the "future of JEA."

Those paying attention to the deliberations of the committee heard some disturbing facts, prominent among them that the era of the golden goose is finished.

JEA's sales for electric and water-sewer service have been flat or declining since the Great Recession. This is not unique to Jacksonville, it's an industry trend in an era of increasing conservation.

It therefore figures that JEA cannot afford to keep making increasing payments in lieu of taxes to the city's general fund without jeopardizing its financial stability.

JEA ostensibly is an independent authority, which gives it the ability to raise rates without political interference. It's a quasi-governmental entity, part utility and part government.

Since the mayor appoints all the members of JEA's board, however, it's not entirely free of political influence.

As for the future of JEA, it may be just like other major businesses — newspapers or department stores — that have been disrupted by an ever-changing economy.

Utilities — once one of the most conservative, staid and reliable stocks — may be undergoing a revolution that calls for more entrepreneurial thinking. That's a radical change in approach.

That change may require an entirely different kind of CEO. Whether that leader is Aaron Zahn, we simply don't know. His appointment as interim CEO happened with far too little public discussion before the decision was made.

But it is entirely possible that a different kind of leader is needed.

The best CEO in JEA's history did not come from the utility business. Royce Lyles was not an engineer, he was finance director of the city of Jacksonville. He took over a utility that was buffeted by sky-high rates due to relying almost entirely on foreign oil. Lyles put the utility's finances back on track and moved JEA's primary fuel to coal.

Today, one of the challenges faced by JEA will be an adjustment to a new era of renewable energy and possibly a move away from centralized power. Once businesses and wealthy consumers start installing solar-electric power with battery backup, JEA will start losing its best customers.

Also, JEA's decision in 2008 to purchase a share of a nuclear power in Georgia, Plant Vogtle, made sense at the time. The utility was seeing annual growth of 3 percent in customer use and there was a desire to diversify away from coal. Natural gas and solar energy at the time were not as economical as they are now.

The failure of JEA's decision makers was in not providing a more economical way to get out of the Vogtle contract.

As former Mayor John Delaney said, quoting his mentor, former Mayor Ed Austin, as saying, "when forming a law firm, plan for the divorce."

Major issues for JEA remain.

The city still has not found a way to finance extension of water and sewer lines or placing power lines underground.

JEA, with its Downtown presence, is planning to move to another Downtown location. And that can be a further stimulus to Downtown development if it is paired with other mixed uses, for instance.

So it is wise to put the sales talk about JEA on the back burner, but let's keep talking about JEA's future.

Future shock is here. Only fools will ignore it.

### LETTERS POLICY

Letters of about 200 words are preferred. All letters are edited for space, clarity and newspaper style. Include a name, address, phone number and occupation. **Email:** letters@jacksonville.com. **Mail:** Letters from Readers, The Florida Times-Union, P.O. Box 1949, Jacksonville, FL 32231.

### A VERSE FOR TODAY

"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

Luke 13:24

### ANOTHER VIEW



### LETTERS FROM READERS

By Times-Union readers

#### Kaepernick's rhetoric makes excuses for those who make bad choices

Unsigned NFL player Colin Kaepernick was recently given an award by Amnesty International for his kneeling protest of "racial inequality." In accepting the award, Kaepernick stated that "racialized oppression and dehumanization is woven into the very fabric of our nation — the effects of which can be seen in the lawful lynching of black and brown people by the police, and the mass incarceration of black and brown lives in the prison industrial complex,"

"Lawful lynching"? Really?

What about the illegal activities these people were engaging in at the time? It seems to me that 100 percent of those incarcerated are there because of choices they made; it is their own fault and they deserve to be incarcerated.

It is time for people to stop blaming everyone but themselves for the consequences of their choices.

Dayle Vickery, Orange Park

#### Let's move beyond dualistic thinking to work together for common good

I wanted to comment on the contrasting views expressed by two recent letter writers — one of them a pastor who wrote that the new tax law unfairly hurts the poor, the other one a reader who responded by criticizing the pastor's view and inferring that the pastor and other religious leaders opposing the tax law are hypocritical because their churches enjoy tax-exempt status.

Both men are obviously sincere in their beliefs.

But both men also show how we all need to move beyond rigid, "this is good and that is bad" dualistic thinking.

The pastor has his heart in the right place, but his letter suggested that he may be under-informed about the way capitalism works.

The pastor's critic also meant well in his response, but he is clearly unaware that churches, synagogues and mosques in our country actually do a great deal that keep Americans from having to pay even more taxes! They do this through extensive charitable efforts that help countless people in their communities — including many people who have never stepped one foot inside a place of worship. In fact, I wish our government could waste as little money percentage-wise as these religious communities do; they waste so little that they are able to squeeze fluid out of even a nickel in their mission to spread goodness and provide assistance.

And the truth is that while some companies and corporations are indeed using some of their tax breaks to hire more, many others are using these new funds to line their own pockets.

The pastor has a good heart; his frustrated critic has an admirable amount of financial acumen. Each of these qualities is an asset — and the key for all of us is to find ways to combine our individual strengths to make a better society for everyone.

Rev. James Black, the Beaches

#### Article on food supplements was rife with falsehoods

Here we go again.

The recent article by a Kaiser Health News writer that suggested that Americans are generally wasting money on food supplements contained a number of partial and total falsehoods.

For example, the writer insinuated that we can get all of our requisite nutrients by simply eating enough fruit and vegetables each day; to guarantee that we receive this benefit, the writer added, many "food" products are "fortified" with numerous healthy elements.

But what the writer failed to mention is that these various ingredients are added because they were first stripped during the whole foods during the preparation process — and that they can never be as beneficial as the original.

Many fruits and vegetables are harvested before they are ripe, and even if that did not occur, it is a well-known fact that numerous essential elements, such as selenium and sulfur, are missing from the soil. Therefore, unless we have the time and expertise to grow our own food or have access to an organic food co-op, we have little choice but to supplement our diet. Even the American Medical Association got around to acknowledging this fact several decades ago.

It is true that not all nutrients are made from quality products, and I prove this in my nutrition practice every day. Generally, items from drug and big box stores are a waste of money.

But when you read an article like the recent one on food supplements, it is important for you to consider the source behind it; in this case, that source is an employee of the medical industry. Most physicians have never studied nutrition, and they are taught to rely on drugs to treat our symptoms. This is unnatural — and it is seldom beneficial.

Randall Haas, physician, Jacksonville

#### Poor traffic signals are plaguing our entire city

I wanted to assure the letter writer who recently bemoaned the state of traffic

signals in our city that the problem is not only occurring in the Riverside/Avondale area; it is happening all over Jacksonville.

Recently, a local television station reported on the relatively mediocre state of air quality in Duval County, which earned a "C" for the number of days with high smog or high soot.

With all of the trucks and cars idling (and polluting) for long periods at red lights, I am not at all surprised that Duval County only earned a "C" for air quality.

Am I the only one who waits for a green light only to be greeted by a red light at the next intersection? When I recently tried to drive Downtown via Hendricks Avenue, I lost track of how many red traffic lights I encountered block after block.

The same was true when I was recently driving to UF Health North during the late morning on a weekday. After exiting Interstate 95 and driving onto Max Leggett Parkway, I had to wait at one traffic signal for not one but two light changes — the green left-turn arrow was on so briefly that not all of the cars could turn before the light changed to red again.

Can't the traffic engineers do a better job of synchronizing the lights in our city?

Sharon Peterson, Jacksonville

#### Our runaway debt could lead to a very dire future

The Times-Union's recent editorial regarding the dangers of the runaway U.S. debt was spot on. The size and growth of America's federal debt is well-documented. And there are plenty of examples of severe economic crises in other nations that have been caused by excess. There is absolutely no doubt that the continued growth of our national debt cannot be maintained; ultimately, that debt will cause a financial collapse.

Foreign nations, companies and ordinary people will come to the conclusion that America can't possibly honorably pay off its' debt, and they will refuse to purchase US debt instruments. A dollar crisis will result in severe economic calamity which, in my opinion, will be as devastating to both America's and the world's economy as the Great Depression — if not worse.

Yet there will be no real reduction in the growth of federal debt. Every member of Congress, regardless of their party, knows that any real attempt to substantially reduce spending will cause the acting party to lose the next election. Then the prevailing party will continue to indulge in wholesale deficit spending.

The coming financial crisis is a certainty. The only question is when.

Michael Pelt, Jacksonville