

# OPINION

## The Times-Union

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### OUR VIEW

## Selling JEA could benefit the city

By Times-Union Editorial Board

Let's get to the bottom line first:  
 \$3 billion to \$6.4 billion.

That's the potential sale price of JEA after subtracting debt and other expenses, reported longtime JEA consultants, Public Financial Management.

City leaders have a duty to fully explore this potentially historic sale.

Let's look at a positive scenario.

- What if proceeds were used to extend water and sewer utilities throughout the county, broken promises made since consolidation about 50 years ago?
- What if proceeds were used to place large numbers of overhead power lines underground, thus protecting citizens from most outages?
- What if jobs of current JEA employees were protected?
- What if rates were protected from increases for a number of years?
- What if proceeds from the sale were placed in separate lockboxes to produce annual annuities so they could not be raided by future city leaders?
- What if a portion of the proceeds were used to pay down some of the city's pension debt?
- What if sale conditions included a commitment to maintain cooperation with city government?

If these and other strings were attached to the sale, the price likely would be closer to \$3 billion than \$6.4 billion. Nevertheless, this could be a game changer for the quality of life in Jacksonville.

A super majority of City Council members would be needed to approve such a sale, 13 of 19 members.

Thus, council and the city as a whole need to fully explore the pros and cons of such a sale. The review needs to be done with a sense of urgency. A straw vote in August could assess the public's support of such a sale.

Wide support would be needed before proceeding, said Alan Howard, JEA's board chairman.

There is no time to waste. The stock market seems to have peaked. JEA's value may have peaked, as well.

While interest in the sale surprised many people, it's more surprising that new conditions for selling JEA had not been brought up earlier.

JEA CEO Paul McElroy said that the subject of utility sales has been a major topic within the industry. In fact, Tampa Electric was sold for \$10.4 billion in September of 2015.

While Tampa Electric has more customers than JEA, that \$10 billion number should have led to these discussions years earlier.

Unfortunately, this process started with an open conflict between Mayor Lenny Curry and City Council President Anna Lopez Brosche.

Curry used arcane council rules to call a special City Council meeting Wednesday over Brosche's objections.

When Howard asked Curry to say a few words, Brosche refused to recognize him. This was inexcusable.

Elected leaders need to put their feelings aside and act for the people.

On the subject of the sale, several City Council members were critical.

Council member Danny Becton said that a decision on selling the utility should have been made before the potential price was determined.

Council members have been deluged with criticism from JEA employees fearful of losing their jobs.

Council member Garrett Dennis said the process thus far has been a "complete disaster" and said he has no confidence in Howard as board chairman.

Local Democratic Party leaders were out in force to oppose a sale. The three-hour meeting was packed with JEA employees carrying signs opposing the sale. Discussions were so intense, there was no time for all of the City Council members to ask questions.

The irony here is that JEA is a potential target because it is performing so well, moving up to the top quartile in J.D. Power customer service ratings.

This is one of the changes since the last City Council auditor's evaluation of a potential sale in 2012.

Other positive conditions for a sale:

- JEA's cash flow and financial position are much better as debt has been retired.
  - It's located in a growing and attractive Florida market.
  - With customers using less power, one of the best ways for utilities to grow is to merge. Recent consolidation of utilities means there are fewer acquisition targets.
  - Interest rates are historically low, so investors are better positioned to add debt.
  - The price-earnings ratios for mid-sized utilities like JEA are high.
- Granted, the sale of a municipal utility of JEA's size is rare and complex.
- But to turn down a full analysis of a sale would be irresponsible.
- Let's get moving for the people of Jacksonville.

### ANOTHER VIEW



### ANOTHER VIEW: HEALTHY START

## Funding for newborns is at risk

By Jane Murphy

Investing in the health of our at-risk mothers and newborns is a true Florida success story that deserves to be celebrated.

Healthy Start services help prevent maternal and infant health problems that can not only be emotionally devastating, but enormously costly. Since the development of our statewide services network, Healthy Start has contributed to a 35-percent reduction in infant mortality.

The health of babies is often used as an important indicator to measure the well-being of a community, and Florida currently leads southern states in the reduction of infant mortality rates.

We have made these strides forward by launching universal risk screening for pregnant women and infants, a hallmark program of Healthy Start services, that is credited with an increase in positive birth outcomes and early entry into prenatal care. Florida is the only state with this valuable comprehensive system.

At the community level,

Healthy Start conjoins the professional talents of physicians, nurses and birth educators with the active involvement of the business, faith and civic service leaders who understand that the well-being of our children starts, quite literally, with the health of our babies.

In order to continue on this positive path of success, continued funding of quality services is essential.

Unfortunately, Healthy Start is being targeted in the Florida Senate Appropriations bill with a potentially devastating \$19-million reduction. If enacted, this approximately 30-percent cut is one that may never heal, resulting in an unprecedented withholding of essential preventive health care for pregnant women and their babies.

Because of the annual birth of some 210,000 newborns in our state, our work is essential and far from complete. We are developing a new care delivery structure that will reach into each community to increase our impact on helping Florida's highest-risk mothers and infants.

In partnership with the Department of Health and Agency for Health Care Administration, under Gov. Rick Scott, this model will have an even greater impact on infant mortality, prematurity and healthy child development by providing:

- A coordinated intake and referral infrastructure.
- Standardized, evidence-based screening interventions within home visiting programs.
- Evidence-based inter-conception care program.
- Enhanced coordination with health plans.

If Healthy Start is not funded at its current budget levels, essential services for high-risk women and babies will suffer.

We can ill-afford to lose 25 years of momentum in supporting healthy pregnancies, improving the status of babies and reducing infant mortality and morbidity.

Voices of concern in support of Healthy Start are timely and welcomed.

*Jane Murphy is president of the Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions.*

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Most Republicans are President Trump's enablers

It is so clear to me that President Donald Trump is racist and unfit to be president of the United States of America.

He is doing so much damage to our country, and to our reputation around the world.

When will the Republican leaders in Congress say, "Enough"?

We the people have got to get involved and vote. When we check out, don't pay attention and don't do our civic duty, we get just what we have now.

**Lavoy Foshee, Jacksonville**

#### Reduce the NRA's reckless influence

What could be more tragic or horrific than learning your child going to school, a movie or mall is not coming home?

It's hearing from our president, Congress and governor that as tragic as the event is, this is not the time to talk about it.

Voters understand that the Second Amendment of the Constitution guarantees a right to "bear arms."

However, my right to kiss my child goodbye and expect them to safely return home

eclipse anyone's right to own a gun.

Stricter laws regulating gun ownership is a start.

The National Rifle Association has had its way for the past 30 years.

Gun violence continues to grow as the power of the NRA has grown.

It's time for citizens, parents and all elected officials to stand up and protect everyone from senseless violence, especially our children.

Change might begin by voting out any representative who seeks the NRA's endorsement.

**Karen Adler, Jacksonville**

#### It's too easy to blame guns

My thoughts and prayers go to the victims and families of Wednesday's school shooting.

It is way beyond time for the killing to stop.

Again, we blame guns.

But we have gun controls, and still we have criminals and unstable people with guns.

We have unstable people who go unknown until they use a gun to kill people.

We have people who pass background checks only to find they should never have had guns.

If we totally ban guns we

would find that criminals would still have guns, and innocent citizens would be unable to protect themselves and their families.

We don't hear much about the times when guns actually save lives.

Gun control alone will not solve the breakdown of our society.

God help us all!

**Sandi Hibbard, Jacksonville**

#### Assault weapons are far too accessible

As I listen to the news of yet another school shooting — this time in Florida — I wonder when we will decide to no longer support a politician who will not improve our gun laws to make us all safer (and especially our kids in schools).

In Florida, it appears to be as easy to buy a military-style assault weapon as it is to buy a handgun, if not easier.

It makes no sense to thank our police officers and other first responders for their bravery and sacrifice while allowing the sale of assault weapons that put them in danger and complicate their ability to protect us and save lives.

**Terry Kelley, Jacksonville**

### A VERSE FOR TODAY

Fro none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.

**Romans 14:7**

### 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.

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