

OPINION

The Times-Union

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OUR VIEW: SCHOOL BUILDINGS

Duval district must reboot campaign

Bruce Barcelo, a wise political consultant, once said that the key to running a successful tax referendum campaign is to give voters what they already want.

In the case of a sales tax proposal for Duval's school facilities, however, it's more subtle than that: many voters simply want a school system funded with no additional taxes.

But the big question voters need to answer is this: "Do you want a brighter future for Jacksonville?"

Because if Jacksonville is to enjoy a brighter future, it needs to have an educated workforce — and that starts at the K-12 level where 70 percent of Duval's students come from poor families.

Can you effectively educate tomorrow's workforce in school buildings that are the oldest in Florida? In buildings that are too large and too costly to fully maintain?

Clearly Duval voters need to face the fact that major changes are needed in the county's facilities and that current revenues are not sufficient to fund the system.

Time to start over

But clearly, too, the Duval County School Board needs to start over in trying to convince voters they should provide the money needed to improve the district's facilities — and at the moment there appears to be no coherent plan in place for a campaign that is similar in scope and cost to the Better Jacksonville Plan in 2000.

That must change, and quickly.

It's beyond debate now that the School Board got ahead of itself by offering a consultant's report on Duval's school buildings before the problem was thoroughly explained to the community.

And let's be frank: most of the schools that badly need to be replaced are tucked away in sections of Jacksonville that many voters have never visited. Because of that, the district needs to find more ways to let more people actually see and understand the gravity of the problem.

It's only after all of this groundwork has been laid that a referendum should be put on the ballot; a November referendum, for example, seems way too premature.

In fact, the community should be actively involved in drafting the facilities plan, since it needs voter approval to be funded in the first place.

How did it get so bad?

Area voters can legitimately ask this question: "How did Duval's school facilities ever get to this woeful point?"

Here are two major reasons:

- The Florida Legislature has been consistently slashing the funds for school buildings while adding new unfunded mandates for school districts to meet.

- Jacksonville's ongoing aversion to taxes, which has prevented this city from approving impact fees for schools or raising sales taxes to fund schools. Indeed, Duval is the only one of Florida's 67 counties that doesn't collect impact fees or any kind of sales surtax; compare that to St. Johns County, which has become the No. 1 school system in Florida by doing both.

And here's another factor: JEA contributes nothing in lieu of taxes to Duval's public schools (Florida Power & Light, meanwhile, pays property taxes in St. Johns County).

A half-cent sales tax, then, appears to be the only practical way to fund the nearly \$2 billion in school replacements and improvements that have been recommended in the Duval school district.

A sales tax is a broader revenue source than a property tax, and a sales tax will tap revenue from non-Duval commuters and visitors.

Duval's facilities need to be upgraded — that's obvious.

But it's also obvious that a referendum to fund those improvements will only succeed if the district comes up with a better strategy to sell it to voters.

Tomorrow: Readers comment on the information they would need before a vote on a sales tax for school facilities.

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A VERSE FOR TODAY

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

1 Peter 5:8

ANOTHER VIEW

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ANOTHER VIEW

Let's develop our own vision for Downtown — not someone else's



Danny Becton

Recently I have had the opportunity to discuss at length the issue of our Downtown vision with members of the Downtown Investment Authority and others.

These conversations have stemmed from years of watching some projects come to Jacksonville and fail, while others have briefly surfaced only to fade away without any results.

One reason why this has happened is because our city has not decisively determined what it is that we want for Downtown; we have been too focused on waiting

for others to tell us what we should have in Downtown.

It is time for us to decide for ourselves what constitutes the successful development of our Downtown area.

District 11 has been a suburban growth area for many years; in addition to constantly planning new development, we have been working on how to redevelop older areas like Baymeadows. But we are doing so by focusing on what we want to see in these areas — not on what others think should be in these areas.

In 2012 — after some community input — a Community Vision Plan was created and adopted by City Council. It is this planning tool that we are using today to move development forward.

In my role as the District 11 representative, I talk and work with stakeholders

to create a vision that meets the community's needs; these stakeholders, after all, will ultimately determine whether any vision is successful.

Recently one of my future City Council colleagues suggested that a community charrette be held to discuss the future of the Landing property. I agree with that idea, but I believe the charrette should include the entire Northbank and more, not just that one piece of waterfront land. How can you complete a puzzle without including all of the pieces? You have to look at the big picture.

If we are to create a successful Downtown, we must work together to develop our own vision for it, not the vision of others.

Becton represents District 11 on City Council.

LETTERS FROM READERS

A state income tax is hardly a panacea

Recently the Times-Union printed a letter from a former New Yorker extolling the benefits of a state income tax — the reader presented it as the answer to educational problems. But when it comes to dealing with crumbling school buildings, I would suggest a budget item for such things as repairs and upgrades.

These buildings did not fall apart within the last few years; periodic maintenance should be part of a school district's overall plan. When money from the district's budget is not available for needed repairs, it can be sought through a sales tax.

Many of us see the sales tax as equitable because you are taxed based on what you can afford to spend; in addition, the proposal can be written with limits and restrictions on its use.

The state of New York has a very high income tax rate. It also spends the first-highest or second-highest amount of dollars per pupil in the country: in 2017, New York spent more than \$20,000 per pupil compared to \$10,284 per pupil in Florida.

Yet when U.S. News & World Report came out with its state educational rankings — which the magazine

compiled by reviewing categories like national testing scores for eighth-grade math and reading, graduation rates and overall college readiness — New York did not even rank among the top five states.

The bottom line is that dollars alone are not the answer to educational problems; there are many contributing factors.

Most Floridians do not want nor need a state income tax. What we need is fiscal responsibility, good management and efficient planning.

Ann Wiggins, Middleburg

Clinton has no credibility commenting on Mueller report

It was so appalling to see the Times-Union publish an op-ed piece by Hillary Clinton, who has no credibility in offering her view on the recent report by special counsel Robert Mueller.

The report found no collusion between the Russians and now-President Donald Trump during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign — and it is now clear that this whole narrative was a treasonous attempt by the deep-state establishment to take Trump out.

Ironically Clinton suggested that if anyone other than Trump had been the

center of a similar investigation, they would have been indicted — this from one of the most corrupt politicians of our time, and someone who should have been indicted for mishandling classified materials, setting up a private unsecured server and deleting 33,000 e-mails.

Louis DePetris, Kensington

A simple step to make America great again

Are you dissatisfied with the condition of America these days? Do you want to "Make America Great Again"?

If so, here is what you should do: you should individually and personally cease to engage in or be entertained by all activities that are — or are portrayed as — illegal or immoral.

This would require no politics or legislation, no spending, no arguing or bickering — and no one would be cajoled or forced into doing it.

If a huge number of Americans would take this step, it would make America greater than it has ever been before. It would be a simple and effective way for you to make a difference — and you will be much happier for it.

William Van Duyn, Orange Park

LETTERS POLICY

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