

# A QUIET REVOLUTION

THE CONSOLIDATION OF  
JACKSONVILLE-DUVAL COUNTY  
AND THE DYNAMICS OF URBAN  
POLITICAL REFORM

BY RICHARD MARTIN • NEW EDITION  
CHRIS HAND • 50TH ANNIVERSARY UPDATE

Readers may be more familiar with the State of Florida Constitution Revision Commission, which was created in the adoption of the 1968 Florida Constitution and meets every 20 years. The commission, to which members are appointed either by the Governor, Senate President, House Speaker, or Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court, has the power to place proposed constitutional amendments directly on the ballot for voter approval or disapproval.

In 2004, City Council adopted the current iteration of the Charter Revision Commission process. Unlike the better-known state version, the Jacksonville commission is required to meet every 10 years and cannot place proposed charter amendments directly on the ballot. Instead, commissioners may recommend changes to the City Council and Florida Legislature.

The first commission following the 2004 legislation met in 2009-2010 and made seven recommendations. While Council members did not adopt any of the suggestions verbatim, they did act on revised versions of two proposed charter amendments. The first, which would have rescheduled City of Jacksonville elections, was sent to voters and narrowly failed in November 2010. The second, which restored ethics provisions to the City charter, passed Council later that same month.

Former Council President Aaron Bowman appointed a new Charter Revision Commission which began work in August 2019. But these commissioners have a distinct advantage over their predecessors. Thanks to the Task Force for Consolidated Government and the community debate it generated, numerous charter-related issues have already been identified.

When former Council President Ronnie Fussell, who now serves as Duval County Clerk of the Court, appointed the last Charter Review Commission, he did not want to overly influence the process. "I didn't have any personal agenda. I truly wanted to put together a group of people that wanted to hear from the community and bring specific suggestions from the community," remembered Fussell in 2018. "I suggested some issues for consideration and asked the members to return with solutions if they found them. But I also told them that if we don't need to change anything, it's okay to say it is working well."<sup>75</sup>

In that same spirit, below are five inquiries which may be of interest to commission members and the elected officials who will review their ultimate recommendations. The goal of this update is not to take sides on any of these questions, but to highlight matters of relevance to the future of consolidation.

One often debated consolidation subject that readers won't see below is the question of whether Duval County constitutional officers – Clerk of Court, Property Appraiser, Sheriff, Supervisor of Elections and Tax Collector – should be elected or appointed. In November 2018, Florida voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment which mandated popular elections as the sole selection method for those positions. In Duval County, the margin was 63% in favor. At least politically, the matter is settled. But for many other issues, like those identified below, the debate is far from resolved.

### 1. CAN JACKSONVILLE RE-WRITE THE TALE OF TWO CITIES?

At consolidation's 50th anniversary, some residents understandably wonder whether an initiative designed to create one Jacksonville has perpetuated a tale of two cities.

When consolidation passed on August 8, 1967 and took effect on October 1, 1968, African American political strength in Jacksonville was diluted. As referenced earlier in this book, the African American share of the vote decreased significantly with the dawn of consolidated government. But these political concerns were assuaged by the promise of what consolidation would do to improve "open drainage ditches...unpaved streets, and rundown schools."

There is little question promises were made. The Task Force on Consolidated Government had no doubt.

The promise of urban services and the assurance that no one would be taxed for services they did not receive was a major selling point of consolidation. The concept was incorporated in the Charter in the distinction between Urban Service Districts and the General Service District. Yet, many services remain incomplete

today, especially in older, less affluent urban neighborhoods, and a renewed commitment is in order.<sup>76</sup>

The task force view is consistent with the original *Blueprint for Prosperity*, which clearly stated that "[i]f we are to prosper as an economic area, as a community of the future, as individuals in pursuit of our goals in life we must insure that our core city is viable and able to speak to the world as a living testimony of our accomplishments. To settle for anything less will inevitably lead to a compounding of our community problems and the infliction of further personal hardships on our citizens as individuals."<sup>77</sup>

Historians need not rely on reports alone. Personal accounts from the consolidation era also tell the story. Former Mayor Jake Godbold, who was a member of the pre-consolidation City Council, observed that "Jacksonville made some mistakes about overselling consolidation. A lot of promises were made that wouldn't be kept or couldn't be kept as fast as we wanted."<sup>78</sup>

No eyewitness account is more credible than that of Alton Yates, one of the most notable figures in the last fifty years of Jacksonville history. On Aug. 13, 1960, Yates and fellow NAACP Youth Council leader Rodney Hurst courageously led a sit-in at the segregated Woolworth's store lunch counter west of Hemming Park. Woolworth's employees closed the counter rather than serve the African American youth. A group of white bystanders hurled racial epithets. Two weeks later, on Aug. 27, on the way to another lunch counter protest, Yates and other Youth Council members were attacked by a mob of white assailants wielding baseball bats and ax handles.<sup>79</sup>

"Ax Handle Saturday" became a watershed moment in Jacksonville race relations — one that led to the desegregation of Downtown lunch counters, government facilities and other public establishments.<sup>80</sup> But it was not the end of Alton Yates' efforts to make Jacksonville a better place. Later in the 1960s, he worked for the Greater Jacksonville Economic Opportunity Program as a community organizer, helping to fight the War on Poverty on the streets of Northeast Florida.

In 1967, Earl Johnson, Sr. invited Yates to join the pro-consolidation campaign. Yates' role was to visit core city residents and encourage them to speak up about problems in neighborhoods where they lived. "It was kind of a secret that people were drinking water that was unhealthy, dealing with septic tanks which were backing up and overflowing, and living in neighborhoods where streets had never been paved," remembered Yates in a 2018 interview. "There was dilapidated housing and children couldn't go to school because of extreme poverty in which they lived."<sup>81</sup>

Yates remembers serious misgivings among African Americans about consolidation. "Many people in the black community were not in favor of consolidation," Yates recalled. "They saw it as a way for the white community to maintain control just as the city was on the verge of electing a black mayor because of the demographics of the city at that time."<sup>82</sup>

Leaders like Earl Johnson, Sr. and Yates attempted to persuade skeptics. Even though many observers thought that Johnson would have been the first African American mayor had consolidation not occurred, Yates said his colleague was less interested in his own political prospects than the city as whole. "He wanted to see improvements to be made for all of the citizens for Jacksonville," Yates said in 2018. "If consolidation passed with major black participation, the black community would benefit as much as the white community. I felt the same way. In my mind, a change in government was needed so that all people would be afforded services on an equal basis."<sup>83</sup>

When asked if promises were made, Yates was clear in his recollection. "The promises were very, very explicit," he remembered. "The campaign targeted problems people were experiencing and sold people on the notion that these were the kinds of problems that consolidation would fix. People were told paving of streets and improvement of water and sewer systems would be a result if we consolidated the city and county governments. Consolidation did some of that, but not nearly enough."<sup>84</sup>

Yates had an especially good vantage point for the implementation of consolidated government. From 1973 to 1995, he

was an aide to four Jacksonville mayors – Hans Tanzler, Jake Godbold, Tommy Hazouri, and Ed Austin – and played a key role in executing Tanzler's directive to make the City of Jacksonville as accountable and responsive to citizens as possible. Fifty years later, Yates looked back and saw major improvements from consolidation for the core city neighborhoods: the re-accreditation of the public schools; rooting out of local government corruption; end of the overlap in services; better City Council representation; and a strong mayor system which made city government far more responsive. But he also saw the challenges that prevented promises made from becoming promises kept.

“When people talked to us about unpaved roads and septic tanks, we couldn't deal with them because we simply didn't have the resources to deal with those challenges,” Yates recalled in 2018. “When we were selling the notion of consolidation, we just didn't know how massive the job was going to be. We underestimated the cost of taking out septic tanks. Once we solved the major problem of sewage outfalls into the St. Johns River, there was little funding left. We eliminated some septic tanks. We paved some streets. But not nearly enough to satisfy the needs of people who are still waiting today.”<sup>745</sup>

Other former and current public officials agree with Yates' conclusion. “We have really shorthanded the core city which voted for consolidation,” observed former Mayor Jake Godbold in 2018. “We got cheated in our infrastructure and haven't been able to run sewer and water out to a number of people. Streets and roads and ditches haven't been corrected in the way they should have.”<sup>746</sup>

While funding was a problem from the start, deferred promises led to increased costs. Former Council President Warren Jones recounted the City had to invest \$33 million for water, sewer and drainage upgrades in just one neighborhood – Grand Park – after two residents died in a 1989 flood.<sup>747</sup> Nearly 20 years later, Jones' District 9 successor Garrett Dennis was told that needed drainage improvements in the Kings Road/Beaver Street corridor would cost \$50 Million. “If we had just started in 1968 and invested \$1 million a year, we could have finished the project by now,” he noted in 2018.<sup>748</sup> Former Council President Anna Lopez Brosche observed that “the cost of promises

made but not kept is such a huge number – potentially in the hundreds of millions if not over a billion dollars. I think some-times people look at that number and say it is just too much to whittle away. Yet if we never try, we never will.”<sup>749</sup>

Some observers think of the infrastructure shortfall as largely confined to Northwest and East Jacksonville, and there is little question that those areas have seen some of the worst impacts. But the challenge of unkept promises is community wide. Vis- it Jacksonville CEO Michael Corrigan, who previously served as Duval County Tax Collector and City Council President, described family members in Miramar never receiving the water and sewer they were promised in 1967-1968.<sup>750</sup> Council President Scott Wilson, whose Southside district stretched between Atlantic and J. Turner Butler Boulevards, observed in 2018 that “older neighborhoods tend to be left behind. Much of my district doesn't have water and sewer. We have drainage ditch-challenges with sidewalks and stormwater drainage systems.”<sup>751</sup> Council Member Joyce Morgan from Arlington described challenges with sidewalks and stormwater drainage systems.<sup>752</sup> Councilman Matt Schellenberg, whose district included Mandarin, said that many homes still utilize septic tanks.<sup>753</sup>

The promises to pave roads, build sidewalks, and replace septic tanks with city water and sewer throughout Jacksonville were complicated not only by increasing costs but also insufficient revenue. Mayors Hans Tanzler and Jake Godbold were under pressure to reduce taxes because consolidation was sold as a solution to expensive governmental duplication.<sup>754</sup> That tradi-tion carried forward. Between the end of Godbold's final term in 1987 and the present, the City of Jacksonville reduced the property tax rate in at least 14 separate fiscal years.<sup>755</sup> The result was a large amount in unrealized revenue that was unavailable to be spent on unfulfilled promises.

“The keeping of promises became such an expensive under-taking that nobody wanted to step up and ask for the kind of money that was necessary,” observed Alton Yates in 2018. “We never really got the job done and still haven't to this day.”<sup>756</sup>

To be sure, the City of Jacksonville has at times invested in infrastructure. In 1986, the City of Jacksonville levied a half-cent gas tax to help pay for road maintenance and construction. In 1993, the City launched the \$235 million River City Renais-

sance. Seven years later, in 2000, voters approved the Better Jacksonville Plan, a \$2.25 billion comprehensive growth management program funded by a half-penny sales tax to provide “road and infrastructure improvements, environmental preservation, targeted economic development and new and improved public facilities.”<sup>97</sup> In 2014, the Jacksonville City Council extended the half-cent gas tax for another two decades until 2036.

“When I was running for mayor, I kept hearing about the need for infrastructure and economic development north and west of the river,” said former Mayor John Delaney, who was involved with the River City Renaissance as Mayor Ed Austin’s Chief of Staff and launched the Better Jacksonville Plan as mayor. “I also knew that one of the weaknesses of consolidation was the reality that neighborhoods did not receive the attention they would have in a non-consolidated county, where places like Arlington would probably have become their own municipality.”<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the Better Jacksonville Plan, Delaney’s response to these challenges was to focus all City of Jacksonville economic development incentives in Northwest Jacksonville and Downtown. He also created a Neighborhoods Department and established “intensive care neighborhoods” to give long-neglected parts of the city enhanced service in housing, infrastructure and public safety.<sup>99</sup>

Each of the City of Jacksonville initiatives from 1986 to 2014 had important community benefits and directed investment to core neighborhoods. But for numerous reasons, including a challenged economy in the last decade, none evolved into a sustained effort across time and City administrations to fulfill consolidation promises. While some progress has been made, much more work remains to be done.

Some of the needed work has already started. In 2016, the City of Jacksonville and JEA agreed to invest \$30 million to replace failing septic tanks. The project prioritized old city neighborhoods.<sup>100</sup> The City’s relatively new bicycle-pedestrian master plan emphasized key areas like the Phoenix community east of Springfield.<sup>101</sup> As former Council President Greg Anderson noted, the City Council Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Com-

mittee provided a structural foundation for future assistance “by creating real public works project lists and funding those projects according to a transparent process.”<sup>102</sup>

But the scope of the investment needed to fulfill the promises of consolidation is monumental and will likely require a multi-step process. These steps could include the following:

- The City of Jacksonville will need to define its mission. Former Council President Warren Jones has framed the goal in terms of the benefits and shortcomings of consolidation. “I think consolidation has made all of the consolidated government more efficient and reduced the duplication of services,” Jones said in 2018. “The challenge today is how we provide those services in a fair manner to reach those neighborhoods that believe they have been left out. It’s going to take a mayor, council, and business community committed to making those capital improvements and improvements in human capital to turn those neighborhoods around.”<sup>103</sup>

- While the promised yet unfulfilled extension of services and infrastructure to all neighborhoods is reason enough to launch this effort, advocates will need to build a holistic business case that features the full array of benefits. For example, infrastructure can have a transformative effect on neighborhoods. As Warren Jones explained from his experience with the Grand Park initiative and other projects, “[t]hose kinds of improvements give pride in the neighborhood. People want to maintain their homes. It encourages private dollars to invest in those neighborhoods.”<sup>104</sup> Beyond the neighborhood impacts, replacing failing septic tanks with water and sewer systems boosts public health and protects environmental treasures like the St. Johns River and its tributaries. Building sidewalks promotes pedestrian safety, especially in areas where children walk to school.

Additionally, the work could have economic benefits. Former JEA CEO Paul McElroy described the impact of replacing septic tanks with three words: “Jobs. Jobs. Jobs.”<sup>105</sup> McElroy opined that septic tank removal was “the most labor-intensive infrastructure on the planet” and would provide substantial employment.<sup>106</sup> As former Mayor and Jacksonville Regional Chamber of Commerce Chair John Delaney explained, “economic development stops at the end of a sewer line.”<sup>107</sup> While infrastructure is not the only factor required for economic

success, communities almost certainly cannot reach their full economic potential without it. This is especially true for neighborhoods hoping for a thriving business sector. As Warren Jones noted, Northwest Jacksonville has struggled to attract businesses in part because one of its most important thoroughfares, U.S. 1, lacks vital infrastructure. Above-ground septic tanks cause visual blight that discourages business growth.<sup>108</sup>

- Those who lead the effort to keep promises would be wise to look through a telescope rather than a microscope. While water and sewer lines (and the connections to those lines), paved roads, and sidewalks are the most discussed forms of unkept promises, some community leaders argue that infrastructure will only help if other needs are also addressed. Former Mayor Alvin Brown and former Council President Bill Gulliford had their disagreements at City Hall, but they are united in their strong belief that affordable housing must be part of the solution.<sup>109</sup> "Affordable housing is critical to the future of this city and other cities," said Gulliford. "You need to be proactive. If you're going to bring neighborhoods back, you must have affordable housing."<sup>110</sup>

- Any serious effort will require sustainability and continuity. Elected leaders and community stakeholders should identify the exact needs and develop a comprehensive plan to meet those needs. While much of the key information probably exists in the city's five-year CIP, bicycle and pedestrian priorities, Public Works and JEA water and sewer project lists and other sources, the successful fulfillment of past promises will require a consolidated and prioritized master plan to guide future mayoral administrations and city councils and keep the work on track regardless of who serves in elected office.

- Even the best planning may be for naught if the City does not identify a dedicated funding source. Fulfilling the unkept promises will not be an inexpensive proposition. As Alton Yates put it, "this is not a \$10 million problem or a \$30 million problem. It is probably a billion-dollar problem."<sup>111</sup> In 2014, the Task Force on Consolidated Government recommended that the City Council and relevant independent authorities devote set percentages of their annual capital budgets to addressing unfulfilled promises. However, more than five years after the task force completed its work, City Council still had not incorporated that recommendation into the City of Jacksonville Charter or Ordinance Code.

Another funding source might be JEA itself. While some legal and financial limitations may govern how JEA utilizes current ratepayer dollars, the authority appears to have embraced a funding role in this process. In an April 2019 presentation to the Jacksonville City Council, JEA Managing Director and CEO Aaron Zahn stated that between 2019 and 2024, JEA would invest \$1.2 billion in "expansion, renewal & replacement and environmental stewardship."<sup>112</sup> The post-2024 projection was \$3 billion for "unfunded community issues: \$2B in Septic Tank Phase Out and \$1B in alternative water supplies."<sup>113</sup> However, three months after that April 2019 presentation, the JEA Board voted to explore a possible sale of the utility. At this time of this writing, it is uncertain how any privatization would affect JEA's investment projections.

Yet another potential solution may be found in the tough decisions that John Peyton made as mayor. The three percent (3%) JEA franchise fee which Peyton championed in 2007 generates approximately \$40 million in annual revenue.<sup>114</sup> Under Article 21 of the City Charter, the City Council may increase the franchise fee to six percent (6%) through a supermajority vote. While it is not clear how much additional revenue such an increase would raise, and how changes to the current JEA business model might impact the fee, the City could utilize the nearly \$40 million it is now collecting annually, the incremental funds generated from an enhanced franchise fee, or both. Assuming the City had sufficient operational capacity to perform the infrastructure work, it could leverage these funds to meet more unfulfilled needs sooner rather than later.

While the above list of potential financial tools is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, many public officials seem to share former Council President Greg Anderson's belief in action. "We need to acknowledge the challenges and put in place a plan to address the deficiencies, whether it is through dedicated source of revenue or a carve out in the capital budget," said Anderson in 2018. "We should be able to look ourselves in the mirror and acknowledge we have work to do."<sup>115</sup> Former Mayor and City Councilman Tommy Hazouri shared that forward-looking perspective. "I think of this issue not so much as promises not kept, but promises that have yet to be fulfilled," he said.<sup>116</sup>



For his part, Alton Yates remains a consolidation supporter. But he believes the work started five decades ago will remain incomplete without a citywide recommitment to keeping all of the promises made. "We have all of the tools necessary to be the greatest cities in the United States. Whatever quality of life you want, you can find it in Jacksonville. That is a result of consolidation," Yates observed in his 2018 interview. "But I don't think we can ever consider consolidation the success we dreamed of until we address and solve the problems of people who live in all neighborhoods."<sup>117</sup>

## 2. **TOO INDEPENDENT OR NOT INDEPENDENT ENOUGH?**

While Mayor Curry and his team have largely succeeded in aligning the independent authorities with his priorities, that kind of harmonization between City Hall and agencies like JEA, JAA, JAXPORT, DIA, Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA) and the Jacksonville Police and Fire Pension Fund (JPFF) has not been automatic in the past. The question for the future is how to balance the independence of the independent authorities with the overall needs of the community.

The independent authority structure, which former Mayor John Delaney said was designed to be "one step removed from the political process," has clear advantages. Delaney opined in 2018 that "independent authorities are one of the best parts of consolidation. They have all proven to be essential, and they work because board members are fiduciaries to the entities they serve."<sup>118</sup> His successor John Peyton, who Delaney once appointed to the JTA board, explained that independent authorities "can operate more like a business. Board members are able to make better long-term decisions. JTA was able to look ahead, see future need and build J. Turner Butler Boulevard and the Dames Point Bridge without having to consider political consequences."<sup>119</sup>

Additionally, the independent authority structure can help ensure focus on key community priorities like Downtown. "It is important in our consolidated government to keep an authority for Downtown," former Council President Matt Carlucci said in a 2018 interview. "For all of its advantages, consolidation took away a singular elected focus on Downtown and replaced

it with seven council members who just have the center city as part of their areas. We must have an authority that wakes up every day thinking about Downtown, which block-to-block contributes more to the tax base than any part of the city."<sup>120</sup>

Duval County School Board member and former Council President Warren Jones, who served on the JEA Board in 2015-2016, is a strong believer in independence. "I think you have to leave them alone at this point," he said in a 2018 interview. "If an authority is going to operate as a business, you have to remove it as much as possible from the politics of the day."<sup>121</sup> When asked what issues the Charter Revision Commission should consider, former Council President Anna Lopez Brosche emphasized "ensuring that independent authority governance structures facilitate the independence they must have."<sup>122</sup>

Independent authority stakeholders make a business case for autonomy. Paul McElroy, who was JEA Chief Executive Officer from 2012 to 2018, observed that rapid changes in the utility and transportation sectors require independent authorities like JEA, JTA, JPA, and JAA to be nimble. Citing JTA opportunities with autonomous vehicles as well as JEA interest in solar power, natural gas, and fiber infrastructure, McElroy said the questions for the City of Jacksonville were clear: "Do you allow independent authorities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to be flexible and nimble enough to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century needs? Will you permit authorities to expand or participate in the change that is taking place? Do you have to stay within the legacy definition of services provided or are you able to broaden your offerings?"<sup>123</sup>

But some city officials believe independent authorities have at times operated as if they were not part of consolidated government. Council President Bill Bishop described the prevailing sense of the authorities when he started his presidency in 2012. "It had been building throughout the community for several years that the independent authorities were becoming a bit too independent," he remembered. "They were behaving as if their purpose of existence was all about themselves."<sup>124</sup> From his perspective, the proper balance is independence in day-to-day operations, with community oversight to ensure alignment with global community priorities. "The authorities operate independent business units, but they are part of consolidated government," Bishop explained.<sup>125</sup>