**Taxation, Revenue, and Utilization**

**of Expenditures (TRUE) Commission**

**Daniel Henry, Chair**

**TRUE COMMISSION**

**Preliminary Meeting Minutes**

*(These minutes are unofficial until reviewed and approved by*

*the TRUE Commission at a future meeting)*

**October 7, 2021**

**4:00 p.m.**

**Don Davis Room**

**1st floor, City Hall**

**Attendance:** Commissioners Daniel Henry (Chair – arr. 4:08), Dr. Keshan Chambliss, John Roberts, Bruce Tyson, Ramon Day (dep. 5:15), Velma Rounsville

**Excused:**

**Absent**:

**Also**: Jeff Clements – City Council Research; Tommy Carter – Council Auditor’s Office; Sheriff Mike Williams

The meeting was convened at 4:04 p.m. by Vice Chair Chambliss and the attendees introduced themselves for the record.

Approval of minutes

The minutes of the September 9, 2021 Commission meetings were **approved unanimously as distributed**.

Appearance by Sheriff Mike Williams

Sheriff Williams said the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office (JSO) is building up its technology base to help fight crime in Jacksonville and is adding manpower to meet the community’s needs. The department has 1,827 sworn officers today of which 1,400 have been hired in the last 6 years since he has been Sheriff; JSO has gone from an old to a young department very quickly. Community engagement is vital and was going to be a focus for 2020 until the COVID pandemic provided a major roadblock to that effort. A common theme of successful law enforcement agencies is a good working relationship with the community. There are no new technology initiatives planned for the remainder of his term in the next year and a half.

In response to a question from Commissioner Chambliss the Sheriff listed a number the department’s community building initiatives: Police Athletic League (reaches 4,500 young people per year); One Cop faith-based initiative; Sheriff’s Watch (20 chapters citywide geared to specific neighborhood concerns); Operation Save Our Sons; Bethune-Cookman University community engagement facilitation by patrol zones (separate meeting of police officers and citizens, then bringing the two groups together for conversation); Bridging the Gap initiative with the Duval County Public Schools; Police Explorer program; Citizens’ Academy (2 per year); Coffee with a Cop; Haircuts and Conversations; and occasional community walks (sidelined somewhat by COVID).

Commissioner Chambliss asked what can be done about witnesses not talking to police about what they see when crimes occur. Sheriff Williams said that may be more perception than reality, and it depends on what group you’re talking to. Gangs and drug runners won’t cooperate with police; community residents often will, albeit sometimes anonymously. Dr. Chambliss asked whether the department still operates stop stations. The Sheriff said there are still a few in operation but the officers don’t really use them because they don’t need their resources to the degree that was necessary before the advent of cellphones and mobile laptops in police vehicles. Officers work from the 6 substations located in the six patrol zones around the city and don’t have to come downtown to headquarters to check in and get assignments. Officers are assigned to zones and stay there.

Commissioner Roberts asked about the recent report made to the JSO by the International Association of Chiefs of Police that recommended hiring 180 additional officers and the methodology by which the IACP arrived at that number. Sheriff Williams said he commissioned and intensive study when he was first elected with a community group chaired by Jacksonville University President Tim Cost and comprised of a number of local business leaders. He said the JSO has just gotten the IACP the report and he has not yet gone through it in-depth and may not agree with all of the recommendations. He doesn’t know the details of their methodology, except for the fact that it’s not the methodology that IACP used to use. He will provide information about the methodology to the commission at a later date.

Commissioner Rounsville asked the Sheriff his reaction to the concept of a citizens review board. The Sheriff said that state law limits what such a group can do – investigation of police officer conduct is confidential until completed and only becomes public after its completed, so a citizen board can’t be involved in that process. He doesn’t favor citizens opining on officer discipline because sometimes those boards can become political tools and platforms for activists to press their agendas. He thinks JSO is very transparent about what it does with regard to officer discipline. He said he is the one responsible for running the department on behalf of the community and he is the center of accountability. The public can express its opinion on his management every four years at election time. The legislative proposal currently before City Council is not very specific and doesn’t seem to recognize what’s already happening at JSO. When that story is told then the community may feel differently about the need to create another mechanism.

Commissioner Day said that his research shows that 2.3 officers per one thousand citizens is a general national standard; Jacksonville is about 323 officers short of that number by his calculation. Sheriff Williams said that 2.3 officers per thousand is the average for Florida, and the national average is somewhat higher. He feels that 2.3 per thousand is a good benchmark for a department that can get more work done than the absolute baseline of responding to emergencies.

Chairman Henry said the recently publicized co-responder program (a trained mental health professional responding to calls with a police officer) seems like a good idea and asked how it’s working to date. Sheriff Williams said the JSO currently has 3 mental health professionals (1 of whom is a clinician) and just got a grant to hire more clinicians. He would like to get up to 6 specially trained officers and 6 co-responders. He is a big fan of the program but believes that is it sometimes misunderstood by the public. The program works best when interventions are done before a crisis situation occurs. JSO has the highest level of officer training available for dealing with mental health issues. The mental health system in the US has largely been defunded and neglected over several decades and law enforcement has been forced to fill the gap in emergencies. He said the Mental Health Resource Center has opened 2 centers in Jacksonville where JSO can take people before emergencies take place. It is always best to intervene before a crisis happens and things get dangerous; then the only choice is to arrest the person and forcibly take them somewhere for evaluation. Mr. Henry asked if there is a way to get this program funded in the budget regularly and not just when the City can find a grant. The Sheriff said would like to have more, but feels the department is getting the same sort of result by training all officers in mental health response and then using the co-responders as a SWAT team dealing with more serious cases.

Chairman Henry asked how much the department’s head count needs to increase over the next 5-10 years and what will that do to the budget over time. Sheriff Williams said the JSO is different than lots of police departments because it also handles jails and corrections and court security unlike most city police departments. He noted that 85% of the department’s budget is made up of salary and benefits.

Mr. Henry asked if there is a value to having some sort of public entity to review police discipline after cases are completed so the community has a feeling of input and empowerment. The Sheriff said many officer investigations are criminal cases so those need to be done in accordance with state law. There can be several outcomes at the end of the process depending on the circumstances of the case. Question 1 - did the officer violate the law? The State Attorney determines whether to file charges or not. Question 2 – if the State Attorney determines that criminal charges are not warranted, did the officer follow departmental policies? That is determined by a JSO internal review board. The proceedings of that board used to be open to the public, but the JSO was sued by the Fraternal Order of Police on the grounds that that proceeding is an internal disciplinary review that should not be open to the public. The FOP prevailed in court twice so those hearings can’t be open to the public. JSO posts recordings of the proceedings on its website and they are available to the public to watch after the hearing is closed. The Sheriff said he believes that a lot of what a citizen review board would want to do is already available to the public via these recordings.

Commissioner Tyson asked about the current state of gangs and gang violence in the city. The Sheriff said that state law defines what is a “gang”, so he prefers to talk more about “group-involved violence” that’s broader than just gangs. He noted that homicides in Jacksonville are down about 40 from this last year, which is better than a lot of cities, so the trend is looking good at this point for 2021. He outlined a number of initiatives the department has been using to help combat violence, including: Shot Spotter technology; enhanced video capability in the Real Time Crime Center; and work with the National Network for Safe Communities on prevention efforts with pastors and non-profits working with families to divert young people from a road to prison or death. He said the Cure Violence program is an effective violence interrupter and seems to be helping. It takes years to make real, substantive changes, and will take even longer if a new mayor or police chief wants their own program and abandons what their predecessor did.

Commissioner Rounsville said she wished more people would get involved in Sheriff’s Watch because it’s a good thing but not enough people participate. Sheriff Williams said word of mouth is always the best advertising, and participants should bring their friends and neighbors. The COVID pandemic really hurt personal interaction so hopefully attendance will get better with time. The JSO promotes Sheriff’s Watch and passes out information pamphlets wherever they go.

Commissioner Chambliss asked about school resource officers. The Sheriff said they don’t work for JSO, as the School District has its own police force. JSO still provides some school guardians for elementary and charter schools pursuant to a recent state law but the department is trying to wean its out of that as the school district hires more people and takes over the function. Commissioner Tyson asked how to get young people interested and involved in civic life; the CPACs and Sheriff’s Watch are overwhelmingly comprised of older citizens and young people aren’t involved. The Sheriff said there needs to be more civics discussion in schools and much more overall community interaction. There are some engaged young people, but lots more needs to be done to build interest.

Commissioner Henry asked about gun buy-back programs. Sheriff Williams said the department has never spent tax dollars on buybacks, using donated funds instead. He said that nationally they are not very effective at combatting crime. The best thing it does is get the community engaged in discussion, as well as getting some people to get a gun out of their house without selling it to another private party. People can always bring an unwanted gun to JSO for destruction.

Sheriff Williams touched on several other issues that have caught the public’s attention in recent years. With regard to proposals to decriminalize marijuana possession, he said JSO has only arrested 100 people in the last year for marijuana possession alone. He noted that since the CVOID pandemic hit the department has been issuing court citations for all non-serious crimes to keep people out of the jail. He believes decriminalization of marijuana works best at the state level with lots of regulation and legitimate businesses supplying the product. Doing it locally on an ad hoc basis would send people to the illicit drug market with no idea of what’s in the product and who is selling it.

Public Comment

Stanley Scott of the African American Economic Recovery Think Tank advocated for a separate city police department and a sheriff’s office that deals with supporting the courts. With regard to City Council ethics he noted that 4 council members got $800,000 in grants for organizations for which they work. The same thing happened with the Social Justice and Community Investment Committee – council members gave millions of dollars to their personal friends. City Council ought to work for the people, not for themselves and their friends. Jacksonville has a leadership problem and the TRUE Commission ought to be advocating for the people and watching out for what’s going on.

Council Auditor’s Report

Tommy Carter of the Auditor’s Office reported that the office has released 3 reports since the last commission meeting:

#850 – Debt Management Fund Audit (<https://www.coj.net/city-council/docs/council-auditor/850-debt-management-fund-audit.aspx>): the audit found that the fund collected more funds than needed for loan repayment, creating a $19.5 million fund balance in addition to $9 million already reallocated by City Council for other purposes. Issues included: lack of documented procedures related to the loan management system; issues with the initial set-up of internal loans resulting on over-collections; issues with the actual collection of internal loans; issues with duplicate internal loans created in the loan management system resulting in some double-billing; and issues with restructuring of internal loans after refunding of extremal bonds or when funds were transferred to other projects. Recommendations include: establish procedures related to the loan management system; implement a method to structure internal collections that does not result in significant excess funds accumulating in the Debt Management Fund; and perform reconciliations between the loan management and financial management systems to ensure the accuracy of various activities.

#813A – Follow-Up on Tourist Development and Convention Development Taxes Audit (<https://www.coj.net/city-council/docs/council-auditor/813a-follow-up-on-tourist-development-and-conve.aspx>): the original audit identified5 issues; 2 were cleared at the time of the follow-up and 3 remain. Remaining issues include systems calculation issues (an error in the computer program can cause an understatement of taxes due when a payment is made both short of the amount due and late); excessive computer access rights and non-collection of taxes due on peer-to-peer rentals (e.g. AirBnB). A new tax collection system to be in effect in late 2021 should take care of the calculation and excessive computer access rights issues. The peer-to-peer property rentals currently don’t submit bed taxes to City. The City Council made an effort via a special committee to regulate peer-to-peer rentals but failed to reach any consensus, so most hosts won’t pay taxes until City Council adopts a regulatory program. The City has hired a company to monitor the few companies that have registered and do pay bed taxes for accuracy.

#851 Driver and Vehicle Information Database (DAVID) Compliance Attestation (<https://www.coj.net/city-council/docs/council-auditor/851-david-compliance-attestation-clerk-of-cou.aspx>): the Council Auditor’s Office, acting as the City’s internal auditor, performed the state-mandated attestation to ensure that unauthorized people are not accessing the driver’s license database. All deficiencies identified have been corrected.

Audit Committee Report

None

Legislative Tracking Committee:

Commissioner Roberts reported on several pending ordinances of interest:

2021-673 – Iguana Investments proposal for redevelopment of the riverfront Kids Kampus site with a Four Seasons Hotel and office building. Mr. Roberts noted that there is no annual escalator provision in the ground lease for the office building site, and no escalator on the $200,000/year contribution the developer will make for Metro Park maintenance and programming.

2021-620 – 2021-625 (6 collective bargaining agreements) – Mr. Roberts said that by his calculations of employee raises since 2007 City employee pay has not kept up with the rate of inflation. The Fraternal Order of Police is closest to being whole, the International Association of Fire Fighters is next, and the other four civilian unions are far behind. Substantially different pay increases for the different unions is traditionally problematic with unions. Mr. Roberts said he would like to have someone from the City come to a future commission meeting and explain the City’s bargaining strategy. Staff will invite Todd Norman of the Employee Services Department, the City’s chief negotiator, to a future meeting.

2021-706 - move City elections from spring to fall.

2021-707 - eliminate at-large City Council member seats.

Chair’s Comments

Chairman Henry asked if the members felt they got all of their Sheriff’s Office questions answered; the consensus was that they had. Asked if the are ready to start crafting a report or if there is something else that needs to be studied, the consensus was that they are ready to start the report. Mr. Henry said he would like to hear from the Kids Hope Alliance about what they do with regard to crime prevention programs in order to get a full picture of the City’s efforts. Staff will ask Mike Weinstein, CEO of the KHA, to come himself or send a representative for the November commission meeting. The Chair asked the members to please submit questions to Mr. Clements to convey in advance to the KHA.

Old Business

Peer cities report – Commissioner Roberts said he has begun doing a narrative report and needs to make some changes in his database. He will report at the next meeting.

New Business

None

Commissioner Comments

Commissioner Tyson said he has received some of the information he requested from the Sheriff’s Office and the Risk Management Division regarding Sheriff’s Office vehicle accident causes and costs and presented a quick summary of his findings. He’s not sure that the data for 2016 is accurate given the large degree of difference in the data from that year to the succeeding years, but the trends in auto liability, medical claims and worker’s compensation are climbing steadily. He still wants to find out what the process is with police officers who are involved in accidents – are there repercussions, additional training, a review board process? It seems to him that JSO employees are involved in too many accidents (over 400 at-fault accidents a year), so something needs to be done to reduce accidents and increase safety.

Next meetings

Audit Committee – at the call of the Chair as needed when new audits/reports are released

Legislative Tracking Committee – at the call of the Chair as needed

Full commission – November 4, 2021

The meeting was adjourned at 5:44 p.m.

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Posted 10.12.21 5:30 p.m.