

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We need to take a serious look at Interlocal Agreements

To the editor:

Thanks to Beaches Watch for its steady presence at the beaches for almost 20 years. Since 2009, its mission has been to educate and engage our residents and stakeholders. In addition to topical presentations, we have come to rely on Beaches Watch to host candidate forums.

As moderator of the recent mayoral forum between Daniel Davis and Donna Deegan, former COJ Councilman and Atlantic Beach Mayor Bill Gulliford stated at the outset that we (the three beach cities) pay 11.9 percent of total property taxes collected in the city of Jacksonville yet we represent 4.5 percent of the population. This striking statement spoke to what many – like me – regard as a clear disparity between what we pay for and what we get to run our cities. Jacksonville needs us and not just during election time. Let me attempt to unpack several concerns that affect our long-term future.

For taxes paid by beach residents, only pennies on each dollar are provided to each of our three beach cities (and Baldwin) under current Interlocal Agreements (ILA). To keep it simple, look at your annual real estate tax notice, and you'll see your projected ad valorem taxes and the different taxing authorities, and you'll see Jacksonville gets a lot more than your city. There is a formula in the ILA for each city that determines the annual millage levy. While we clearly benefit from many county services under these agreements, I posit that we are currently paying more than our fair share for them – and other costly Jacksonville initiatives – despite our own needs and the beaches' huge contribution to Jacksonville's tourism and recreation.

Given population, economic growth and changing demographics, many do not fully grasp the history and complex relationship between the beaches and Jacksonville. Consolidation went into effect in 1968, whereby the three beach cities (and Baldwin) retained their independence. In 1979, a lawsuit was filed by these cities to clarify the county services and the millage levy. In 1982, that suit was settled with an Interlocal Agreement. In 1993, another lawsuit was filed by the cities, citing a breach of the 1982 agreement and calling again for a review of county services and the millage levy. In 1995, John Delaney was elected mayor of Jacksonville, and he was instrumental in reaching an agreeable settlement in 1996, with each city having an updated ILA with Jacksonville.

Some might recall that, during the 1990s, there was also an unsuccessful campaign for the beaches to form a separate Ocean County. This was also framed around the cost-benefit ratio of being a part of Duval County. The idea failed to progress beyond the 1996 negotiations.

Back to the mayoral forum: Mr. Gulliford asked some great beach-specific questions. He asked if each candidate would consider re-opening or discussing the ILA. Each candidate stated it would be important to examine the issue and engage with beach leaders. Mr. Gulliford also asked questions about:

- 1) Jacksonville solid waste costs being paid from loans from the COJ general fund that our beach taxes support; 2) tipping fees charged only to Atlantic and Neptune Beach; 3) the possibility for additional gas tax dollars at the beach; 4) support of coastline and marsh resiliency efforts to mitigate flooding; and

- 4) the potential for additional funding for our parks/facilities used by many in Jacksonville.

I could have added to Mr. Gulliford's questions with my own about: 1) how each city will fill the revenue gap when Better Jacksonville dollars expire for the beaches; 2) how to offset "double taxation" when we start to pay down pension liability for JSO (in addition to funding our own police departments); and, 3) how we can better eliminate silos between our cities to address critical regional infrastructure needs.

We will have a new Jacksonville mayor very soon, and it has been many years since the last serious look at the ILA. At a minimum, many sections are out of date. While we are "three beaches – one community," we are not equal in terms of size, need or vision. Atlantic and Neptune Beach may be more motivated to revisit the ILA than Jacksonville Beach for various reasons. I am not advocating secession, or reopening the entire ILA, or filing suit, as each option has inherent risk. Maybe there can be agreement to negotiate amendments. I am asking the new mayor, our beaches elected officials, Councilman Rory Diamond and other Jacksonville city leaders to start a serious conversation, with serious intent, together, to examine our options about what makes sense for the future. Whatever happens, I hope citizens will further educate themselves and will get engaged. Thanks, Beaches Watch. Watch the April 23 Beaches Watch Forum here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmBb5v5JOf0.

**Ellen Glasser
Atlantic Beach Mayor (2017-2022)**

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