

Center for Advocacy and Social Justice

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**Jacksonville Neighborhood Bill of Rights:**

**Do Jacksonville Neighborhoods Have a Voice in City Government?**

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Since the 1968 Jacksonville Consolidation, the City of Jacksonville (COJ) continues to function on the “strong” mayor-council system. The consolidation vote abolished the existing COJ government and Duval County government and consolidated them into one – creating a form of municipal governance. Consolidation was meant to increase efficiency in COJ action and to boost confidence in the local government. This system allows the Mayor of Jacksonville to have veto power on all resolutions and ordinances passed by the City Council. It also gives the Mayor the power to form the city budget and appoint and dismiss the leaders of all city departments. With so much power consolidated to the mayor, it is important to discuss how the citizens of Jacksonville can be heard by the COJ. To establish communal input on COJ issues, Jacksonville’s City Council established the Neighborhood Bill of Rights in 1995. This Bill adopted new guidelines governing working relationships between the various Jacksonville neighborhood organizations, COJ departments and their employees. However, as a result of the consolidation, some citizens have reaped benefits while others have suffered from the disadvantages of the system.

**The Benefits and Disadvantages of Consolidation**

There are many benefits and disadvantages that came with the Consolidation. One of the big advantages that accompanied consolidation was economic development. Jacksonville has seen a boost in economic growth since consolidation. Acosta, Baptist Health, CSX, FIS, Florida Blue, Black Knight, and many other large companies are incorporated in Jacksonville. Mayor Lenny Curry consistently maintained economic development in the city as one of his main priorities. Though the unemployment rate hit a historic low toward the end of 2019, economic restrictions imposed in March—as a result of Covid-19—caused a deterioration in the job market and an 11.6% official unemployment rate.<sup>1</sup> To counteract the effects on the economy, the city has allocated \$159 million dollars facilitated by federal funds earmarked for coronavirus relief (including \$40 million for citizens to help with mortgage and rent payments, \$9 million for small business relief and \$25 million earmarked to offset revenue declines, including inspection fees and taxes on rent).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the alarming economic statistics that persist, Mayor Curry still seems reassured that Jacksonville’s economy is heading in the right direction. He is quoted on an interview with Fox and Friends stating that the city is experiencing a “major economic boom”<sup>3</sup> and has touted the 2020 Republican National Convention, being held in Jacksonville, as evidence. However, the Convention was later cancelled due to Covid-19 concerns.

Another advantage of Consolidation was an improved and efficient resource base. Prior to Consolidation, COJ and Duval County departments acted on their own separate agendas. This

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<sup>1</sup> Lenny Curry, FloridaPolitics.com, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/340334-major-economic-boom-jax>

<sup>2</sup> A.G. Gancarski, FloridaPolitics.com, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/330086-jax-financial-relief/>

<sup>3</sup> A.G. Gancarski, FloridaPolitics.com, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/340334-major-economic-boom-jax/>

created duplication and overlap in many services, which ultimately caused valuable resources to be wasted. As a result of consolidation, the resource allocation in Jacksonville have enhanced the efficiency and capability of the COJ to allocate resources where it deems necessary. The Jacksonville City Council and Mayor’s office discuss different budget proposals for the allocation of funds, but ultimately the Mayor decides on the final budget and focus. Despite this process, budget decisions and a narrow focus have led to a clear disparity in monetary distribution among the communities within Jacksonville.

While Consolidation has improved the resource base of Jacksonville, the allocation of funds to help communities improve has not been distributed fairly and has put many communities at a disadvantage. Namely Northwest Jacksonville, a majority African American community, continues to suffer from a lack of basic improvements to roads, water and sewer lines, drainage systems, and streetlights. According to Data USA, Jacksonville currently has a 16.4% poverty rate. African Americans make up 30% of the Jacksonville’s population, but consistently have higher rates of poverty than all other races and ethnicities within the city.<sup>4</sup> These communities also face a higher rate of crime, fractured education systems, and housing issues. “City leaders have generally relied on modest programs to address long-standing inequities in Jacksonville and have shied away from more ambitious suggestions.”<sup>5</sup> All are programs that have produced benefits, but have been unable to continue because of the lack of support from the COJ.

### **Current Attempts to Remedy City Problems**

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<sup>4</sup> Jacksonville, FL, DataUSA.com, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/jacksonville-fl/#economy>

<sup>5</sup> To Those Left Behind, Jacksonville.com, <https://www.jacksonville.com/news/20180914/to-those-left-behind-consolidated-government-is-not-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>

There have been many sincere attempts by COJ officials to remedy the alarming issues within Jacksonville. In 2014, a task force was created to re-examine Consolidation and distribution of wealth. The task force “recommended that the Council change local law to require a fixed percentage of the City’s capital improvement budget to be dedicated to pre-Consolidation neighborhoods that still lack improvements to roads, water lines and sewer lines, drainage systems and streetlights. The proposal went nowhere.”<sup>6</sup> Jacksonville Journey was another program created to combat the issue of violent crime in Jacksonville. “Former Mayor John Peyton committed \$35 million to the effort, but the Journey never got a dedicated funding source to keep it afloat. The Journey was folded into a political restructuring of the COJ’s anti-violence programs pushed by Mayor Lenny Curry.”<sup>7</sup>

In attempt to answer calls for community input, Mayor Curry established the Safety and Crime Reduction Commission. The Commission’s primary purpose is to “undertake an in-depth review of the various programs within the city and abroad which have been deemed successful and contribute to safety and crime reduction.”<sup>8</sup> The Commission’s duties included “investigating the efficacy of these programs and make recommendations for how the City can leverage existing resources and expand and implement successful programs to create a comprehensive community-wide anti-crime initiative, which includes components of public safety, education, mental health, literacy, positive youth development, physical health, neighborhood stability,

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hong, Florida Times-Union, <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/local/2020/09/16/city-hall-could-have-minimum-spending-requirements-oldest-areas/5803138002/>

<sup>7</sup> Florida Times-Union, <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/opinion/editorials/2009/09/23/jacksonville-journey-crucial-steps-ahead/15972372007/>

<sup>8</sup> Safety and Crime Reduction Commission, Coj.net, <https://www.coj.net/city-council/safety-and-crime-reduction-commission>

crime deterrence, workforce training, and intervention and rehabilitation.”<sup>9</sup> The Commission also has the authority to recommend funding programs and initiatives that would help increase community input and support crime reduction measures. However, with the emergence of Covid-19, following the Commission’s February 2020 meeting they did not meet again until August, 2020; despite City Council and other governmental bodies meeting virtually.

Dr. Richard Danford, Community Engagement Chair of COJ’s Task Force Subcommittee and President of the Jacksonville Urban League, emphasized the importance of renewing, revising, and reaffirming the principles stated within the Neighborhood Bill of Rights.<sup>10</sup> In City Hall, Dr. Danford highlighted the importance of the Neighborhood Bill of Rights with respect to effective community involvement. He also discussed the importance of distributing copies of the ordinance to the public for them to understand the rights that they possess as citizens.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Danford’s recommendation was largely disregarded; yet he persistently raised the issue again during the first year of the Commission’s deliberations.

City Council President Tommy Hazouri initiated a Special Committee on Social Justice and Community Investment, assigned to address the neglected aspects of the Neighborhood Bill of Rights. The committee aimed towards furthering equal opportunities to Jacksonville citizens, and intended to “eradicate systematic bias as well as honor the unfulfilled promises of Consolidation.”<sup>11</sup> The Committee’s duties included engaging “in active listening to those

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<sup>9</sup> Safety and Crime Reduction Commission, Coj.net, <https://www.coj.net/city-council/safety-and-crime-reduction-commission>

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Richard Danford to Mark Griffin (May 3, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Special Committee on Social Justice and Community Investment, COJ.net, <https://www.coj.net/city-council/standing-committees/special-committee-social-justice-community-invest>

adversely affected by the decisions of the past which created historic inadequacies” and to address future disparate outcomes of Jacksonville residents.<sup>11</sup> However, it is unclear (or unlikely that) if ‘active listening’ can effectively eradicate the systematic bias and historic inadequacies Jacksonville citizens have faced.

### **Benefits of Neighborhood Bill of Rights**

Although the Neighborhood Bill of Rights has not been modified or updated since its inception, the ordinance contains many benefits for citizens of Jacksonville, including established obligations that the COJ has to its citizens. The ordinance declares that every officially recognized neighborhood of the city has the right to expect and receive notifications about city actions. The notifications expected from city officials, employees and agencies include the following:

- (1) Prompt, courteous, informed responses to all questions regarding City business;
- (2) Advance notification of any City-related public works or utility projects taking place within or adjacent to a neighborhood, including the day(s) and probable length of any street closures, utility interruptions, or other adverse impacts on the neighborhood, and the name and phone number of the City representative most knowledgeable and able [to] answer questions;
- (3) Notification of the submission of any application for rezoning, zoning or land use variance or exception, Development of Regional Impact or Planned Unit Development application, or other significant land use action;
- (4) Opportunity for formal input into the annual budget process, including the opportunity to express preferred city government priorities;

- (5) A timely personal response of its district councilperson or that councilperson's aide to questions directed to the City Council office [and];
- (6) The opportunity to participate in the design of publicly-funded projects within or adjacent to the neighborhood.<sup>12</sup>

All of these rights were created to ensure that every citizen within the Jacksonville community stays informed of local government action and has the opportunity to have a voice in the city's decision-making. This ordinance is also intended to hold the COJ ensure accountability for adherence to a transparent and open forum of communication with the public.

### **Does the City of Jacksonville Enforce the Neighborhood Bill of Rights?**

An ordinance can only be effective if it is actually enforced. While the City of Jacksonville claims to value community input on city objectives, local government has not honored its obligation to enforce the Neighborhood Bill of Rights. Rather, the city has found ways to consistently circumvent their obligations to the public. One prime example of COJ's avoidance of communication obligations is present through the use of city ordinances. Section 656.130(c) of Jacksonville's Code of Ordinances states, "the failure of a neighborhood organization, CPAC or other organization required to be notified under this section shall not invalidate or otherwise have any effect upon a public hearing or action taken by the committee or the Council on the

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<sup>12</sup> City of Jacksonville Neighborhood Bill of Rights, Coj.net, [https://www.coj.net/departments/neighborhoods/docs/housing-and-community-development/neighborhood-initiatives/citizen-planning-advisory-committees-\(cpacs\)/neighborhood-bill-of-rights.aspx](https://www.coj.net/departments/neighborhoods/docs/housing-and-community-development/neighborhood-initiatives/citizen-planning-advisory-committees-(cpacs)/neighborhood-bill-of-rights.aspx)

application for rezoning.”<sup>13</sup> In essence, this disclaimer relieves the city of its obligation to ensure that Jacksonville residents get notified about rezoning and land use – such changes could have significant impact on property owners and devastating affect on property value.

Another unfulfilled obligation is evidenced by the lack of community involvement within the budget process. As previously stated, the Mayor has the final say on the budget process. The Mayor’s office may insinuate that considerations from organizations (e.g. The Safety and Crime Reduction Commission) are considered; however, precedent has shown recommendations made to the city appear to be overlooked. Though the Mayor has created programs intending to acquire community input, “[Mayor] Curry has said he does not support any kind of dedicated funding source to support programs.”<sup>14</sup>

More recently, City Council President Tommy Hazouri questioned the costs to taxpayers from the city hosting the Republican National Convention. Hazouri wrote a memo to Mayor Curry’s office requesting, “financial information soon, so council members can judge sensibly any agreement they are asked to approve. Among questions raised in his memo was whether the city will pay up-front costs that might be reimbursed later and whether the COJ has spent anything yet on the [RNC].”<sup>15</sup> President Hazouri’s questions are not without merit. In order to properly inform the community of how publicly funded tax dollars are allocated, the City Council must be

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<sup>13</sup>Code of Ordinances, Municode.com, [https://library.municode.com/fl/jacksonville/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=ZOSE\\_CH656ZOCO\\_PT1GEPR\\_SPCPRREAMZOCO\\_S656.130SPNONEORCPUMNEORCIORNEORPAPUHE](https://library.municode.com/fl/jacksonville/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=ZOSE_CH656ZOCO_PT1GEPR_SPCPRREAMZOCO_S656.130SPNONEORCPUMNEORCIORNEORPAPUHE)

<sup>14</sup> To those left behind, Jacksonville.com, <https://www.jacksonville.com/news/20180914/to-those-left-behind-consolidated-government-is-not-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>

<sup>15</sup> Council President Questions RNC Costs, Jacksonville.com, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/floridatimesunion/>



aware of the financial investments of city-hosted events. Yet still, budgeting information remains difficult to obtain from the COJ.

The city does have a list of neighborhood associations responsible for engaging with the public. Unfortunately, the COJ's website reference list is far from comprehensive when it comes to adequacy of contact information. Chris Hand and Richard Martin, authors of *A Quiet Revolution: The Consolidation of Jacksonville-Duval County*, attempted to reach out to the listed neighborhood associations in hopes of gaining insight on the adequacy of communications with the COJ. Unfortunately, they did not receive responses from any of the associations. In addition to the neighborhood associations, they also reached out to the Mayor's office on several occasions to discuss the enforcement of the Neighborhood Rights Bill. This attempt at communication also rendered no response.

### **Conclusion**

The Neighborhood Bill of Rights is an essential ordinance that every citizen of Jacksonville needs to be aware of.<sup>16</sup> Too many underserved communities within Jacksonville continue to go unheard and unspoken for. The majority being African-American communities that have suffered through decades of lackluster support and development. Our community deserves the right to

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<sup>16</sup> Neighborhood Bill of Rights: Jacksonville, Florida Code of Ordinances § 656.130. [https://www.coj.net/departments/neighborhoods/docs/housing-and-community-development/neighborhood-initiatives/citizen-planning-advisory-committees-\(cpacs\)/neighborhood-bill-of-rights.aspx](https://www.coj.net/departments/neighborhoods/docs/housing-and-community-development/neighborhood-initiatives/citizen-planning-advisory-committees-(cpacs)/neighborhood-bill-of-rights.aspx)

express opinions and grievances with the City of Jacksonville. Our community deserves assurance that concerns will be heard and acknowledged. Our community deserves to have confidence in transparent communication by city government. The only rational way to materialize this attainable and orderly state of affairs is if the City of Jacksonville honors and enforces its obligations ascribed within the Neighborhood Bill of Rights. The resolution to inequity starts with equal opportunity.