

Mayor takes position against JEA privatization

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Jacksonville's mayor wants to redirect \$1M for after-school programs <p>Mayor Lenny Curry's proposed budget includes money to hire nearly 150 more officers and firefighters. Newly-elected city council president Anna Espinoza signaled her support for the move. </p> (None)

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By Rich Jones

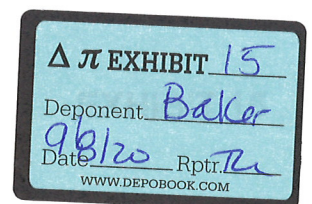
Jacksonville, FL – Saying the process was hijacked by special interests and politicians, Mayor Lenny Curry says he will not submit any JEA privatization plan to the Jacksonville City Council.

In a statement to WOKV, [Curry says he was initially supportive of the process.](#)

The Jacksonville City Council established a special committee to study the potential sale of JEA, and those efforts continue at this. We are working to reach members of that committee to find out how their process may be impacted by the Mayor's comments.

Here is the full statement:

Since the consolidation of city and county government 50 years ago, we have had a countywide, electric utility. With the 1997 addition of public water and wastewater services, JEA is a community-based, taxpayer-owned electric and water service provider. Through its agreements with other private and public partners, we have been served by a locally-controlled production of electricity and clean water for decades.



These services are integral to our daily life; we need them to work, live and play. Also necessary is the need for our government and public entities to account for those things that belong to the taxpayer - from the assets of our municipal utility, to public buildings and spaces, and even the fleet vehicles our employees use. Next to public safety, I have no greater responsibility than to protect taxpayer investments and ensure budgets that are fiscally prudent.

So when the JEA Board and senior leaders of the organization undertook an effort to know the financial value of our municipal utility's assets, I was supportive. Our tax dollars and the hard work of public employees created that value, and city government has an obligation to preserve it. The discussion moved to privatization, and as city law speaks to this I felt an obligation to understand what impact the value had on future planning.

Since 1999, there has been a mandate written into our city ordinance code, Sec. 21.302, for anyone serving as mayor of Jacksonville, and the executive branch administration, to consider if essential government functions traditionally served by government could be better served through privatization. It is not simply a suggestion but a responsibility to consider this and for the mayor to make such policy decisions. As this law states, if and only if, the mayor submits a privatization plan would it then proceed to City Council.

As the elected leader of the executive branch, I take my responsibilities as mayor very seriously. I never proposed any privatization plan, nor did I ever suggest or say to anyone that I would propose such a plan. Instead, as I have consistently stated, I did not believe I had enough information to correctly contemplate such a proposal. That is why I wanted to gather information and talk to stakeholders about these issues. In this effort, I met with JEA leaders, municipal utility experts, financial experts, union representatives and workers from JEA.

Unfortunately, a clear and reasonable process to discuss these issues was hijacked by a few special interests and politicians with an agenda to put politics above all else. Fixated on the false choice of "sell" vs "don't sell" they created an environment fostering misinformation and mistrust. Despite this, the valuation undertaken by JEA leadership did yield evidence of important strengths we have in our community utility's balance sheet. It also revealed real weaknesses.

Technology and innovation are making renewable power more affordable, while efficiencies are reducing our water and electric needs. The result is data showing that JEA customers may increase in number, but revenues will decrease. We also learned that for a decade, a move toward nuclear power – although it was perhaps well-intended – has left Jacksonville saddled with at least \$1.2 billion in obligations. Worse is that those dollars committed years ago, may never yield any real value to JEA customers and taxpayers whose backs this liability rests upon. When you combine falling revenue and billions in liability on the balance sheet, you have to take a hard look at the future.

The challenge of such a look forward requires leaders to strategically prepare solutions to the problems we've uncovered. We must also recognize that an organization unfairly spun into frenzy by politicians is leaving generations of JEA employees and customers feeling uncertain. This is why I am supportive of the recent efforts of the JEA Board and senior leadership to steady the organization and embark on internal reviews that strengthen the organization for the years ahead.

This strategic planning and long-term commitment to JEA employees and customers is also why I am choosing to state unequivocally that I will not submit any JEA privatization plan to the City Council.

I have consistently outlined that my priorities at JEA are protecting the investments made by taxpayers and customers, while also keeping the promises made to generations of JEA employees. Those priorities ensure consistent power and clean water for all of us, and I remain committed to these results.