



Opinion

Guest column: JEA answers concerns about retention bonuses

By Jon Kendrick

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JEA's primary responsibility is to provide the community we serve with safe and reliable electric, water and wastewater services.

That starts with the people who provide these services, JEA employees. As various recapitalization possibilities are discussed, our employees need to know that their future is at the forefront of the minds of JEA's leadership.

Therefore, JEA is offering retention agreements to all 2,000 employees. These agreements are meant to incentivize JEA employees to continue to serve the customers of Northeast Florida if a recapitalization event occurs. Offering retention agreements as an employee incentive is a very common business practice.

As the chief human resources officer serving all 2,000 JEA employees, this past week's news headlines were particularly distressing to me. Perpetuating a narrative that implies JEA's senior leadership team has a significant financial interest in a recapitalization event via retention agreements is inaccurate and implies that the senior leadership team doesn't have employees' best interests at heart.

Not only is the narrative inaccurate, it is careless. As a JEA senior leader whose job it is to first serve others and look out for the interests of our employees, I'm in a good position to set the record straight.

April Green, chair of JEA's board of directors, said it best in her July 28 Times-Union guest column.

"We did not vote to sell JEA. We voted for JEA to pursue a path forward that protects its employees, customers and our larger community."

The July 23 JEA board vote to allow the utility's senior leadership team to explore alternative, non-governmental options to its current structure was a vote for ensuring that JEA employees are taken care of in the best possible way.

In fact, at the July 23 JEA board meeting, JEA's board of directors publicly discussed and approved retention agreements for not only the 14-person senior leadership team, but for all full-time employees (should a recapitalization event occur).

These retention agreements were listed as one of the "minimum requirements" for any recapitalization effort. Each employee's retention agreement is equal to the amount of one year's salary, paid over three years: one-third on the day of closing a recapitalization event, one-third on the first anniversary of the event and one-third on the second anniversary of the event.

No one receives the retention payments unless and until they stay employed at JEA. Further, if any employee ceases to be employed during the retention period due to involuntary termination, the employee will still be eligible to receive the entire retention payment amount following the same timeline.

Again, these retention agreements were offered to all full-time JEA appointed employees, not only the senior leadership team. Retention agreements for JEA employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement were included in recently negotiated labor contracts, which have been ratified by all five unions represented at JEA and are awaiting approval by the City Council and mayor.

It's important to acknowledge that yes, JEA's senior leadership team's retention payments would be higher than their colleagues' (should a recapitalization event occur). This isn't a ruse, or an "incentive to sell," it is simply the result of higher salaries.

Until a course of action is decided upon and approved, lingering questions will remain about the future of JEA and its employees. The retention agreements are a tool to help allay the fears of our employees about their future.

It's easy to forget how dangerous it can be to keep electricity and water running into our homes. JEA's electrical linemen risk falls, electric shocks and burns and our water and wastewater workers also face treacherous situations daily.

We want them focused on safety as they provide quality service to our community. That is why the retention agreements were created.

Jon Kendrick is vice president and chief human resources officer for JEA.