

Opinion

Guest column: JEA board member asks for community engagement

By Henry Brown

Posted Nov 10, 2019 at 2:01 AM

There is a famous saying: "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

This is exactly what JEA's board, its senior leadership team and its employees are doing.

As we prepare for the future, the friction that JEA's exploration of a variety of scenarios and alternatives to its current structure has created within our community is palpable.

The tenor of the friction has shifted from less sporadic and productive to more persistent and emotional.

JEA's board of directors understands that this isn't an easy process, and at certain stages there are more questions than answers. Let's remember that JEA's scenario-based strategic planning process is unlike any of the planning processes that JEA has ever conducted or the Jacksonville community has ever experienced.

During anxious times, when the unknown overwhelms the known, it is sometimes tempting to follow the alarm call of the angriest voices.

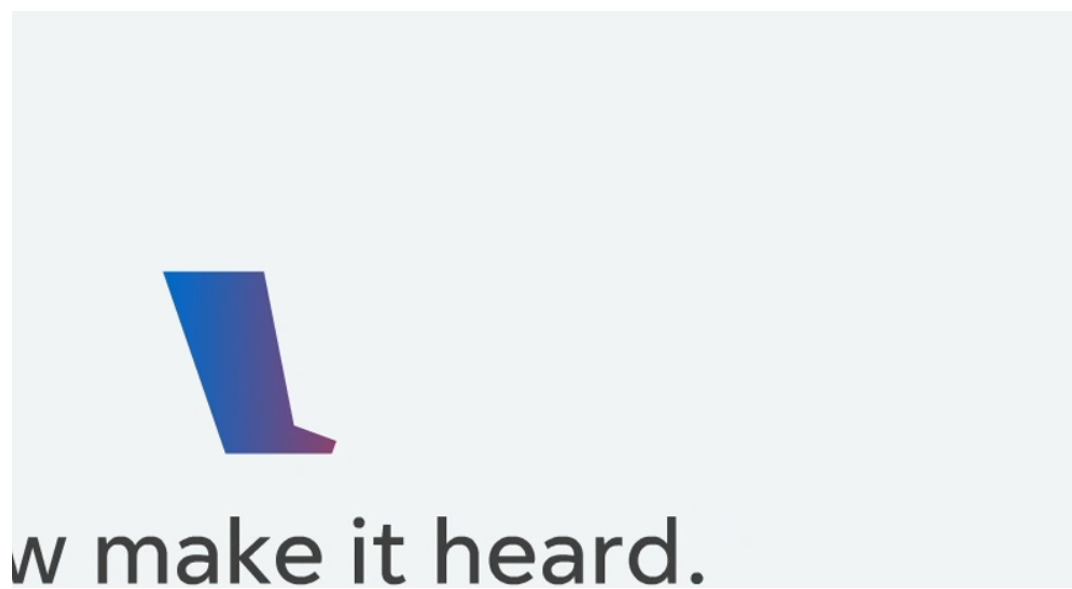
It's important that we become more willing to listen, more inclined to speak honestly without indignation and more open to the facts.

We can all agree that JEA is experiencing what is one of the most critical moments in the history of the utility industry. No one has said that JEA is going under tomorrow.

However, the reality is, the utility continues to experience declining revenues, increased operating costs and the introduction of new disruptive technologies at a faster pace.

It is true that other municipally owned utilities are experiencing the same challenges. But what's not understood completely is that each utility will have to make the decision that works best for its specific circumstances.

JEA, as a municipally owned utility in Florida, is uniquely constrained by the Florida Constitution, different state statutes and the city's charter, in its ability to grow within today's dynamic marketplace.



And while "privatization" is a concept that includes a range of options, it arouses sharp political reactions.

JEA's board is committed to making the best decision possible with our priority on our community, our customers and our employees.

None of this ends with JEA's board. The board will review options, make its thoughtful and well-reasoned recommendation and ultimately the Jacksonville City Council will vote, and if council approves, the voters of Duval County.

JEA's senior leadership team continues to listen and engage with more transparency and answers to common questions.

For example, JEA introduced its "What's Next Jax" website and "Just The Facts Jax" Twitter handle, not as propaganda but as a hub for information and community engagement.

The JEA board applauds City Council's workshop-based approach to exploring the future of JEA as well. We encourage the community to participate in person or via live stream.

The JEA board also respects and welcomes feedback from interested community organizations.

We all have the same goal and that is what's best for Jacksonville.

Henry Brown is a JEA board member.

