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LOCAL

# Mayor expresses support of JEA newcomer as interim CEO, addresses critical letter from former mayor

"Despite your frequent statements that you've not made up your mind on the JEA's future, I am one of a whole lot of people in Jacksonville who are having a hard time believing you," the former Jacksonville mayor wrote in a letter to Mayor Lenny Curry.

The latest on JEA: A major shift



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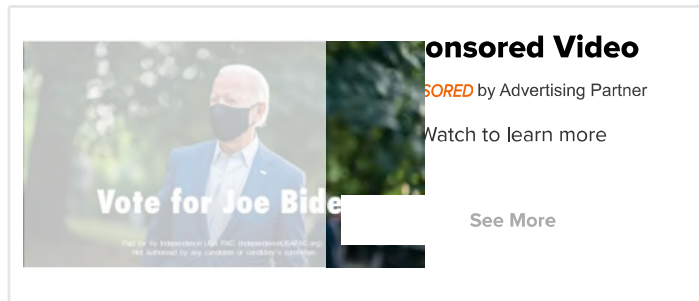
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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- A trio of city leaders met with media on Wednesday, one day after JEA's leadership board unanimously voted in a new interim CEO.

On Tuesday, JEA newcomer Aaron Zahn was neither questioned by the board or asked about his qualifications for the position. Regardless, each board member supported him over six-year long JEA employee and CFO Melissa Dykes for the position.



After receiving the votes, [Zahn immediately evaded media and refused to answer questions.](#)

Wednesday morning Mayor Lenny Curry, JEA Board Chair Alan Howard and Zahn invited the media to City Hall for a Q&A.

Minutes before the interview began, First Coast News obtained a letter offering advice to the mayor and criticizing his handling of JEA.

[Former Jacksonville Mayor Jake Godbold tells First Coast news he hand-delivered the letter to](#) Mayor Curry's office last Wednesday. He says he hadn't heard a response from Curry until the letter went public Wednesday morning. He said he received a voicemail from the mayor, which he intends to return.

He also says his intention was to keep the letter private.

It says in part, "Despite your frequent statements that you've not made up your mind on the JEA's future, I am one of a whole lot of people in Jacksonville who are having a hard time believing you."

"Look, I've interacted with Jake since I've been mayor and so I saw that was his signature on it, he certainly has not expressed any of that to me in person," Curry said. "So I'd be happy to meet with him and certainly have that conversation."

When asked for clarification about his comment on the signature and if he was alleging that someone else wrote the letter for Godbold, the mayor replied, "You heard what I said."

Beyond the unprecedented letter from one mayor to another, Curry pushed back when questioned about JEA's newest, and unprecedented, pick to lead one of the nation's largest utility companies.

He scoffed at the idea that there could be a conflict of interest.

First Coast News asked Curry what he had to say about some concerns expressed by City Council members about a potential conflict of interest with Zahn, since the two reportedly go to church together and Zahn worked as an advisor on Curry's transition team.

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"Are you really going to ask a question about if he goes to church with me? What does going to church with me have anything to do with public policy or business?," Curry asked.

First Coast News, reporter Shelby Danielsen responded, saying, "My question was, do you feel like your personal relationship was a conflict of interest?"

"No, and again I would like to know what who goes to church with me has to do with any of this?" said Curry.

"He was also on your transition team. Do you feel like that relationship, that work relationship, was a conflict of interest nominating him and supporting him coming in?" asked First Coast News.

"Are you suggesting that anyone who was on any transition team, the number of people which include non-profits the city does business with, I could give you a list of things, are you suggesting that's a conflict of interest?" Curry said.

"City council members brought me the concern, I think just in fairness I was bringing it to you to get your response," said First Coast News.

"The same city council members that have created this circus and grabbed headlines, so they got their headline and I appreciate they got their headline," Curry said.

Accompanying this exchange with Curry, First Coast News also had questions for Zahn after he said he immediately wants to "halt" conversations of privatization.

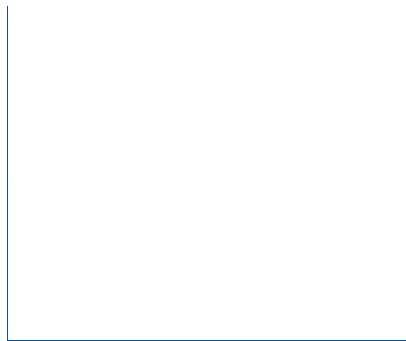
"So, we are going to focus on the three things I just mentioned," Zahn said.

He outlines his three main goals as follows:

1. Gain a better consensus with City Council, the Mayor's office and JEA employees
2. Outline expectations from the public of JEA leadership's roles and responsibility
3. Find a strategic plan to move JEA forward as a "decentralized" utility

The term "strategic plan" has been used often in conversation of JEA. It's a phrase that has often been echoed by Mayor Curry. He said this in a previous interview with First Coast News:

"There was no board member appointed with the idea of selling JEA, board members were appointed with the idea of corporate governance, oversight in management, and what's the best strategic way to oversee management as they navigate the strategic way forward."



Zahn said going forward he wants to hit reset with JEA to give it a clean slate before moving forward.

"Until you understand what the public and those policymakers actually expect from JEA of its roles and responsibilities and its value to the community, it's almost impossible to have a conversation around what kind of monetization or capitalization you can have," he said.

Meanwhile, City Councilman Garrett Dennis introduced new legislation on Wednesday. Dennis proposed to allow City Council members to elect four of the seven JEA board members instead of Mayor Curry appointing all members with their approval. That would leave three remaining JEA board appointments for the Mayor.

Dennis also proposed that any future JEA candidate be required to have lived in Duval County for at least 3 years, versus the current 6-month requirement.

[City Council's Special Committee on JEA](#) will meet on Thursday at 9 a.m. at City Hall after being postponed last week.

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