

COUNTY

Curry's former chief administrator, political strategist worked for JEA bidder, according to documents

Christopher Hong chong@jacksonville.com

Published 4:47 p.m. ET May 15, 2020

NextEra Energy, the parent company of Florida Power and Light, hired Sam Mousa and Tim Baker, two local lobbyists with close ties to Mayor Lenny Curry, in connection to their attempt to purchase JEA, according to a response to a subpoena it received last month from a Jacksonville City Council investigative committee.

The revelation that Baker and Mousa worked for NextEra raises a number of questions, including whether Baker was offering policy advice to JEA while working for the company considered to be the front-runner to win the competition to buy the city-owned utility.

The Times-Union has revealed Baker provided advice to JEA officials during a private meeting in 2019 and that JEA's now-fired leader Aaron Zahn tried to hire him to help with his controversial and costly attempt to sell JEA. Baker also sat in on a secret meeting last July, when JEA officials discussed their then-confidential plans to privatize the utility.

The Times-Union also revealed a consulting firm co-founded by Baker and Mousa paid for a secret trip to Atlanta to watch a playoff baseball game they attended with Zahn, Mayor Lenny Curry and City Council President Scott Wilson. Zahn has said he reimbursed the consulting firm \$750, which is likely less than his portion of the trip's actual cost.

Baker has said on multiple occasions that he wasn't working for any entity that tried to buy JEA, although he acknowledged for the first time Friday his company was hired by Florida Power and Light. He said he was paid to perform "**community relations**" services but didn't perform any work related to privatizing JEA. He said he ended the contract at the end of last July.

The council investigative committee issued subpoenas last month to NextEra and the other entities that submitted bids last year to purchase JEA. NextEra responded Friday, submitting

a list of 13 consulting, law and lobbying firms that included some of the biggest names in Jacksonville's lobbying and consultant circuit.

NextEra's lobbyist roster is also a subject of interest to federal investigators, who served JEA last month with a grand jury subpoena. The subpoena demanded a comprehensive and specific list of documents, including any related to communications between any lobbyist "in any manner connected" or previously connected with NextEra Energy.

Mousa served as Curry's chief administrator between 2015 and 2019. He worked as a special consultant to Curry after retiring last summer, although the contract ended around the end of 2019.

Mousa, who has refused on multiple occasions to say whether he worked for a company bidding on JEA, couldn't be reached for comment Friday. His attorney, Charles Arnold, Jr., said his client wouldn't speak to the media until all investigations into JEA were complete.

Arnold said Mousa wasn't the target of a criminal investigation. When asked if Mousa has been asked to speak to a grand jury, Arnold said he couldn't comment.

"Sam's position is simple: Sam has done nothing wrong," Arnold said.

Jordan Elsbury, an aide for Curry, said the administration wasn't aware that Mousa worked for Florida Power and Light and that Mousa never worked on any issues related to JEA while he was contracted as a consultant.

NextEra's list of lobbyists and consultants included Mousa Consulting Group, Inc., which Mousa founded shortly before his June 2019 retirement, and BCSP, LLC, a company Baker co-founded in 2016 with Brian Hughes, Curry's confidante and 2015 campaign spokesman who joined his administration at City Hall in 2018.

Corporate filings show Hughes was removed as a manager of the company on December 7, 2017, shortly before Curry hired him as his chief of staff. Weeks later, the company received a contract with Florida Power and Light, according to a letter Baker provided Friday to the Times-Union showing that he terminated the contract in July 2019.

NextEra's list of hired guns also included Jacksonville super-lobbyist Paul Harden; Right Coast Strategies, a firm with connections to Susie Wiles, a long-time political consultant who managed Donald Trump's victorious 2016 Florida campaign; the Fiorentino Group lobbying firm; the Rogers Towers law firm; and Squire Patton Boggs, a national lobbying firm with close connections in Washington, D.C.

An FPL spokesman provided a written statement Friday saying the company is fully cooperating with the investigation into JEA.

“NextEra Energy participated ethically and responsibly in the JEA ITN process and we expect the investigation to validate this. We are providing our full cooperation with the investigation,” said David Reuter in a statement.

Baker’s involvement in privatizing JEA dates several years back to the utility’s first - and short-lived - exploration into the issue. Two former City Council members, Bill Gulliford and Matt Schellenberg, said Baker arranged meetings in 2018 with a Florida Power and Light lobbyist. Baker denied arranging the meetings but said he attended them.

The Times-Union also revealed Baker provided policy advice last year to Zahn and other JEA officials about privatizing the utility during a secret meeting, although Baker denied ever being paid by JEA. When asked whether Baker was hired by JEA, JEA officials said Zahn expressed an interest in doing so but never did.

In a sworn interview with city attorneys, Zahn revealed he invited Baker to a secret meeting at Club Continental in Orange Park last July.

Documents show JEA officials hosted outside attorneys and investment bankers who traveled to attend the three-day session to discuss privatizations. In his sworn testimony, Zahn said Baker provided JEA officials “policy advice” on constitutional ballot changes.

The Times-Union also revealed Mousa and Baker arranged a secret trip in October to Atlanta, where they watched the Braves play the St. Louis Cardinals in the divisional round of the Major League Baseball playoffs with Zahn, Curry, and Wilson.

Zahn told city attorneys he paid \$500 for the airfare and \$250 for the ticket, which included seats behind the dugout and access to an exclusive lounge that offered unlimited beer, wine and food.

Baker and Mousa have refused to say how much they actually paid for the trip, although a Times-Union review of airfare and ticket prices found that the total cost of trip was likely between \$8,000 and \$11,000.

Although public officials are restricted from accepting gifts from lobbyists, a loophole in Florida’s ethics law allowed Curry, Zahn and Wilson to reimburse the Baker and Mousa’s consulting company, Conventus, LLC, a fraction of the trip’s likely cost. State law allows officials to use a fare for a coach flight to calculate reimbursements for private travel.

At the time of the trip, JEA and city officials were also bound by the state's "cone-of-silence" law that forbids discussions outside the negotiating table about selling JEA with any of the bidders or their representatives.