

Coates: Can Jackson bounce back?

Cedric Coates, Guest Columnist

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

Can Jackson Bounce Back?

Amidst a crumbling infrastructure, a squadron of companies leaving, and now city workers being placed on two-day furloughs for at least two years, Jackson struggles to find funds to pay for its infrastructure problems. With an already staggering economy, Mayor Tony Yarber looks for ways to find revenue to pay for city ills, while City Council knocks down the mayor's proposal to raise property taxes. The city of Jackson is in trouble!

Mayor Yarber spoke to a group of Jackson State University graduate students in Jackson (of which I was in attendance) and pledged that citizens would start to see his plan began to roll out by the fall of this year. Yet, no one can say this has even begun to come to fruition. He emphatically stated that we would be able to log onto the city's website and see updates of improvements of what the city has done. As of mid-December, I have not been able to do so. I am not saying the mayor has not been able to keep his promise, but I believe the mayor's projects have begun to prove that his plans amounts to more a vision rather than a reality

without the presence of real dollars to back these projects.

As a graduate student in the public policy program, I think it is our responsibility to study the functions and policies of state and local government. Because of this, I interned with the city's Finance Administration Department in spring 2015. It gave me the privilege to attend departmental budget hearings, as well as public hearings. This department carries the responsibilities of carrying out the mayor's fiscal policies. It was during this time that the mayor talked of moving away from line-item budgeting to performance-based budgeting to best prioritize the city's general fund revenues. This, I feel, is the best way to measure each department's performance.

In public policy, we studied President Woodrow Wilson and learned that politics and public administration should be separate. In saying this, it is the city finance administration's responsibility to implement fiscal responsibilities prioritized by the mayor's policy guidelines. This is determined at the beginning of the fiscal year. With this in mind, I believe the No. 1 priority is to fix Jackson infrastructure.

No major city can sustain economic growth without a sound infrastructure. So, if Jackson is going to bounce back and become a competitive, thriving city in the global markets, we are going to have to begin to do business differently. There is no one magic trick to fix these problems, but city officials are going to have to devise several resource-efficient strategies to generate funds to pay for capital projects. It could be we should model a city like Houston, Texas, which has an infrastructure-backed tax that goes to budget funds under the capital outlay item.

During President Ronald Reagan's administration, the federal government scaled back drastically the amount of federal dollars allocated to state and local governments. Because of this, municipalities have been left with the job of fending for themselves. Recent studies have revealed Jackson's infrastructure improvements would cost nearly a billion dollars. City officials, it is unfeasible that the state and federal government won't step in to allocate federal and state dollars to help assist Jackson with such an overwhelming burden. After all, Jackson is the state's capital city.

I initially stated city officials are battling over how to best fix the city's problems without raising taxes to help pay for capital projects. Fixing the city's infrastructure problem and budget woes requires some serious thought and perhaps, a few compromises.

It remains to be said that Jackson can bounce back and become a vibrant and thriving city we can all be proud of. However, this can only occur with the realization that we cannot keep doing business like we have in the past. As my father once said, drastic changes call for drastic measures. It is not primarily up to the mayor and city officials, but the entire city to pitch in to help pull ourselves out of this rut.

If not, we will find ourselves heading down the same road as Detroit, Michigan, and that's not where we should want to be by any stretch of the imagination.

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