

Levar Stoney's Richmond: How the city's next mayor has promised to govern

By GRAHAM MOOMAW AND NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Saturday, November 12, 2016 10:30 pm

At the beginning of their first transition meeting Thursday, outgoing Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones shook Mayor-elect Levar Stoney's hand with exaggerated enthusiasm.

"I'm ready to give it to you," Jones said with a smile as he prepares to leave office after eight years, the maximum allowed under the city's term limits.

"Mayor Jones, the last eight years, you've done the Lord's work. I know it has not been easy," Stoney said. "And I look forward to gleaning from you some wise tips on how to get through a four-year term."

After Stoney's surprising outright victory became official on Wednesday, the 35-year-old former secretary of the commonwealth and aide to Gov. Terry McAuliffe is shifting his focus to the transition of power.

On Thursday, Stoney announced the leaders of his transition team. The co-chairs of the team will be Tiffany Jana, a local entrepreneur who advises organizations on diversity and inclusion, and Bill Leighty, a lobbyist with a long résumé in state government culminating with stints as chief of staff to former Govs. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine.

The transition director is Thad Williamson, a University of Richmond professor who formerly led the city's anti-poverty office, started by Jones.

"They have a wealth of knowledge about government and about Richmond," Stoney said in an interview Friday. "Those are the sort of people I want to surround myself with, whether it's in City Hall or as a team in general."

Leighty, who directed the Virginia Retirement System and held a wide variety of other roles over nearly three decades in state government, brings "a wealth of knowledge in government operations as a whole," Stoney said.

He described Jana, a former stage actress who promotes cross-cultural and civic engagement as president and CEO of TMI Consulting, as representing Richmond's "transformers."

The mayor-elect said he intends to reveal his full transition committee this week, but he said the list will include former mayoral candidate Jon Baliles. The 1st District city councilman dropped out of the running



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Richmond Mayor-Elect Levar Stoney (left) laughs as he shakes hands with Mayor Dwight Jones at city hall on Nov. 10, 2016

and endorsed Stoney just days before the election, a move that Baliles described as a consolidation to deny the mayoralty to former Del. Joe Morrissey.

Stoney said he has not had any discussions with mayoral runner-up Jack Berry about possible roles at City Hall.

This weekend, the mayor-elect planned to go to a wedding, serve as the ceremonial starter of the Anthem Richmond Marathon and make thank-you calls to supporters.

Stoney is slated to be sworn in on New Year's Eve, assuming office in 2017 on a promise of bringing Xbox-style innovation to a government that at times seems stuck in the Atari era.

“There's a lot of work to do,” Stoney said. “I'm ready and excited to do it. I'm still pinching myself.”

Based on dozens of mayoral forums and policy papers, the snapshot below offers a glimpse of what to expect as the Stoney era begins.

Basic services

On the campaign trail, Stoney called City Hall a “sick patient.”

The cornerstone of his plan to address what he described as a culture of dysfunction and inefficiency is the completion of a comprehensive performance review of every city department within his first 100 days in office.

Based on the findings, he said he will shift resources to areas that need them the most and identify and eliminate redundant and outdated programs.

Stoney also laid out a number of financial goals, by promising to make sure the city's annual financial report is completed on time every year he's mayor; increase the city's tax collection rate from 96 percent to 98 percent; and put forward budgets with well-funded line items for such basics as snow removal, leaf collection, and road and alley maintenance.

Education

Stoney made a handful of specific commitments on education.

The most expensive among them is to replace Armstrong High School in the East End during his first term, something he estimated would cost at least \$50 million. He also promised to increase funding for after-school programs.

Stoney's positions are somewhat less concrete when it comes to how he would allocate funding for schools. Rather than make any firm promises, he said he would work out a plan upon taking office with his counterparts in the schools and City Council.

He said the plan likely would include some kind of local funding formula for schools — something the school system and education advocates have been advocating.

He said he couldn't commit to any specific numbers before taking office, but in a departure from his opponents, Stoney has said he favors dedicating funding on a per-pupil basis rather than as a percentage of

the entire budget.

Stoney also emphasized that he would pursue an increase in state funding for schools through a change in Virginia's local composite index. He said he believed his prior experience working in state government would give him an advantage when it came to lobbying for the additional dollars.

"I believe the Richmond Education Association has endorsed my candidacy because of my ability to navigate the halls of the General Assembly — whether that means Republicans in the House of Delegates or in the state Senate or friends in the executive branch — I know how to walk across the street and knock on the doors necessary to find the additional funding," he said.

The baseball stadium

Stoney said he would support city financing for a deal in the works to replace The Diamond as long as the surrounding counties "pay their fair share."

In mid-October, the city, Virginia Commonwealth University and the Richmond Flying Squirrels announced they are in the early stages of talks to construct a \$55 million stadium near the Boulevard. They were silent on how much money Richmond and other surrounding localities might contribute.

So far, no one's asked for a specific dollar figure, but sources said a city contribution likely would be in line with the current annual maintenance cost the city pays on the stadium, about \$300,000 a year.

Stoney participated in the negotiations between VCU, the city, the Squirrels and the state as McAuliffe's secretary of the commonwealth and then, after he stepped down to run for mayor, as a private citizen.

Business issues

Stoney said he would seek to reduce the city's business, professional and occupational license taxes (BPOL), which are easily the highest in the region.

The tax, which is assessed on a business's gross receipts, varies by type of business and size, but it generates about \$30 million in total revenue annually.

He said he would consider implementing a local, per-pack cigarette tax to make up revenue lost through any reduction.

Stoney also said he would aim to streamline the permitting process, which often is criticized and slow and difficult to navigate.

To address the issue, he said he would focus on staffing. "I believe in investing in human capital," he said. "You can bring in software, but if the right people aren't operating it, it's a problem. It has to begin with human capital."

Taxes

Stoney, like all the candidates in the race, offered a blanket promise not to raise taxes, though, as noted above, he's also suggested he's open to instituting a local cigarette tax.

Crime

At multiple points on the campaign trail, Stoney said he thinks the city's current police chief, Alfred Durham, is doing a good job and would keep him in his current role.

He said he would work with Durham to address the police department's current staffing shortage.

Stoney said he supports decriminalization of marijuana, which is being reviewed at the state level.

Public transit

Stoney publicly supported the bus rapid transit line the city is building along Broad Street, calling it a "good start."

As mayor, he said he will explore expanding the system to include a north-south corridor. He named Jefferson Davis Highway and Chamberlayne Avenue as a possibility.

On high-speed rail, Stoney said he wants to see Main Street Station become the region's transit hub, eschewing hypothetical proposals for a new Boulevard station.

Confederate monuments

Stoney has taken a moderate approach to the hot-button issue of the city's Confederate monuments, saying that while he would not "shed any tears if the Jefferson Davis statue comes down or if the name of Jefferson Davis Highway is changed," pursuing such a removal would not be a priority.

Instead, he said, he would "address another Confederate legacy: systemic poverty disproportionately impacting the lives of African-Americans."