

## After eight years in office, Richmond Mayor Dwight Jones reflects on accomplishments, missteps and where he'll head next

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Saturday, December 17, 2016 10:30 pm

Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones came into office eight years ago riding a wave of enthusiasm.

His term was to be one of collaboration and progress — a distinct departure from former Gov. and Mayor L. Douglas Wilder's combative four years at City Hall.

He leaves office in two weeks with decidedly mixed reviews, an approval rating that has dropped to 26 percent and even a mild admonishment from Mayor-elect Levar Stoney questioning the fiscal responsibility of a last-minute bonus he offered city employees.

During an interview Friday in his office on the second floor of City Hall, Jones brushes it all off: He's not worried about what the press, politicians and polls say.

"The man on the street stops me every day and expresses appreciation for my service," he said. "I think it's a different Richmond today than it was eight years ago and I feel good about that."

Jones says he's most proud of his work to combat poverty in the city. He established a city department dedicated to the cause and in the process helped launch a larger discussion about the problem in the region.

He ticks off a list of other successes: Under his watch, the city built four new schools and a new jail that replaced a decrepit 1960s facility, hosted an international bike race, built an immediately popular pedestrian bridge over the James River, secured a massive federal grant to install the city's first rapid transit line, put in place a soon-to-launch bike-share program and set work in motion to open a slavery memorial in Shockoe Bottom.

His administration also put in place numerous plans he hopes will guide the city for years to come on issues such as public transit, public housing, bicycling and the riverfront.

But much of that work has been overshadowed by persistent problems: a Social Services Department found to be doctoring reports and leaving children in unsafe homes, a Finance Department that has struggled to put out basic fiscal reports and one high-level departure after another.

Jones' legacy also is dragged down by a bruising battle he ultimately lost over a proposed baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom, his inability to reach agreement with the city's school system over funding and a



### Mayor Jones

Richmond Mayor Dwight C. Jones announced last week that full-time city employees, not including school workers, would receive an extra \$500.

distracting investigation into whether Jones and his staff directed city resources toward the church where he serves as senior pastor.

Jones' supporters and opponents alike agree: His eight years were a mixed bag of good and bad.

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**Outgoing Councilman** Charles Samuels offered a hopeful speech about unity and cooperation when he was sworn in as the body's president in 2012. He quickly found himself at loggerheads with Jones as the battle over the stadium dragged out.

"He did a lot of great things," Samuels said. "I think the mayor can take credit for several items. He gets credit for Redskins training camp, Stone Brewing, the jail. And at least partial credit for revising but implementing Wilder's plan for new schools.

"What really hurt was what appeared in the public eye to be lack of attention to core services. I think if he had been more attentive there, the public would be a lot more forgiving when things didn't always go right."

Samuels' successor, outgoing City Council President Michelle Mosby, emerged as a close ally of Jones. She offered a long list of positive contributions he's made to the city.

"When I look at his legacy, we started things that will do well for the city and should be continued," she said. But, she said, the criticisms he's faced are warranted.

"I think when we're running a business, a corporation as big as Richmond, you kind of have to stay on top of it a little more," she said, citing in particular struggles in the finance department.

Asked about those and other criticism, Jones said he responded and, eventually got the right staff in place. He hired a new chief administrative officer, Selena Cuffee-Glenn, who is generally well-regarded and whom Stoney has said he will keep.

The only regret Jones acknowledged was that it might have taken him too long to make the high-level staffing changes that seem to have set the city back on the right track.

At the close of the interview, Jones' press secretary, Tammy Hawley, floated a theory about why Jones hasn't received more accolades for his time in office: "I think that the mayor is too quiet about his accomplishments. He's not the biggest cheerleader about everything he does. There's a long list of accomplishments we haven't even touched on that any other politician would be in here waving a flag about, but the mayor sat here and didn't even pat himself on the back.

"When you look at the accomplishments versus the missteps, the accomplishments just go on and on and on. ... I hope you can give him his due recognition."

What follows is a lightly edited and condensed transcript of a wide-ranging, 40-minute Friday interview with Jones.

**What do you consider your biggest accomplishment in office?**

There are so many accomplishments it's difficult to single out one. I think that one of the big things for me is that poverty — the discussion about poverty in Richmond and the need to mitigate it is now a thing. When I came into office, it was not a thing.

And so, I hear the business community talking about it. I hear the philanthropic community talking about it. And we've been able to codify it as part of city government and I really believe that discussion is a narrative that was missing. That's not bricks and mortar, not something that shines and glitters, but it's something that's necessary for Richmond if it's going to be a great city or even a good city.

**Do you leave office with any regrets?**

I'm a very practical man, and so, you can't do the things that need to be done in government in eight years. The turnaround time of things in the government is very, very long, so it's difficult to do that. So, the public housing elimination is a long road. It's going to take a long time to get that done. But it's started. And we just hope that the course will be stayed. Economic development is a long road. It's something that you do everyday.

There are just so many things that we were able to accomplish, and I feel good about all of them.

**Was there anything that surprised you about being mayor? Were there any parts of the job you weren't expecting when you took office?**

Local government is difficult. Local government is the last stop along the way. You know, I served in the General Assembly for 15 years, so when people brought me local issues, I could always refer them to the mayor or City Council. (Laughs)

But this is where the buck stops. You know, if people want their street cleaned or paved or if they have a problem that's local, you have to take care of it. And so, I wasn't necessarily surprised, but it was impactful to be able to have to deal with being the last stop.

**Why did you feel called to run for mayor in the first place, and do you feel like you've satisfied that?**

You have the tendency not to look at the big picture, you have the tendency to look at today and forget about yesterday. Eight years ago the city was in great flux. There was a lot of combat between the schools and the city and that bothered me. It really did bother me.

And I thought that more of a collaborative style of leadership would be beneficial to the city. And so, as I was looking over from the state to the city, I thought maybe I could help.

**Do you see any parallels between the reception Levar Stoney has received so far and the reception that you got as you were coming into office?**

I think it's an opportunity for a new voice. I think Levar is a young guy with a lot of enthusiasm, so I think people are willing to give him a chance.

When I came in eight years ago, we felt the same enthusiasm. We felt the same swagger that I think he's feeling now. We had an inaugural ball and you couldn't get a ticket to it. We had inaugural activities where people were just extremely excited about the changing of the guard.

**My impression looking from the outside in is you felt you weren't getting a good return on investment from the school district. You seemed to want to change discussion from decrepit school buildings to the number of accredited schools.**

I feel good about the fact that we were able to build schools. We had the discussion about infrastructure. We provided more money to schools than ever before. Most of the budget of the city goes to schools. And so, I have no regrets in that regard.

I do have a regret that the discussion has not been balanced in terms of "we need money" versus where's the accountability for the money that you're asking for. So, in a year where you have under-performing schools continuing to under perform, unacceptable graduation and dropout rates and a request for a lot of money, I just think — when I would ask my dad for money, he would say, "What do you need it for? What are you going to do with it?"

They need to be specific and attention needs to be brought to the fact that, so far, the proof is not in the pudding.

**Your public opinion rating has sunk fairly low. Based on other statements you've made lately, it seems like you don't really think your work is fairly represented. Do you think that's the case?**

It's the nature of the beast. I've been here eight years. I think eight years, getting beat up day to day, some people begin to believe what they hear or what they read. I'm not at all disillusioned about the fact that I've done a good job.

And the public that I see is very appreciative to me. I get great reviews where I go and great reception where I go. My inbox is filled with congratulatory messages. The Management Roundtable had me in for a thank-you last week. Venture Richmond invited me today; I wasn't able to make it. The local ministerial group — I wasn't able to make it, but I sent a video.

So, I mean, you know — the press is one thing but the people are another thing .

**Taking stock of your time in office you can count a number of major successes — building a jail, four new schools, hosting a major bike race, numerous infrastructure projects — but at the same time, a number of missteps — the social services department failings, the juvenile justice center closure and all the issues related to the finance department we've seen bubble up. Do you think that's a fair assessment? That your term has been kind of a mixed bag?**

You know, I inherited some things, and every person who becomes a leader is going to inherit some things. The question is, were you able to deal with it. And so we have completely reconstituted juvenile justice. So if we inherited it and left it the way it was, then it would be an acceptable criticism, but juvenile justice is doing extremely well right now.

Social Services in a city that has the level of poverty that we have is always a big thing. So it has improved greatly. You're not going to hear me say that everything that needs to be done has been done. But I think we're on the right track.

In finances, we put the right team in place. Selena Cuffee-Glenn didn't just show up here one day; I hired her. Lenora Reid didn't show up one day; I hired her.

**That's a valid explanation for, particularly, the issue in juvenile justice, but it's a harder sell when you talk about the finance department, where your people were in place for pretty much the whole time. And similarly with Social Services and Carolyn Graham — those were your people who were overseeing that as it kind of unraveled.**

Right. And so, you know, you bring in a crowd and you see how they work and then you might have to bring in another crowd. And so, we did that. The only question that I think is valid for me is that I wait too long.

**So you think you might have waited too long?**

I think we could have done it a little bit sooner, but the people that came in had impeccable credentials. And on paper, they should have been able to do the job. It takes a minute to see if it measures up with what is on your résumé and what you're able to do or accomplish. A lot of people take jobs they're very well qualified for. But even though they are not retired, they are retired. (Laughs). They don't want to work. And this is not a place for people who don't want to work. This is a hard, hard place. You've got to work hard.

**Did you read (Commonwealth's Attorney) Mike Herring's report on the investigation into your administration? What's your reaction to the scrutiny over potential overlap between your church and city employees?**

I did. I think you have to keep in mind that it's an investigation that I asked for. Didn't have to do that, but I wanted there to be no doubt that no impropriety took place. Some of the things he said were subjective, and he has a right to his opinion.

**It painted a fairly negative picture even as it found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing, and he also said pretty clearly that you probably shouldn't have done things the way you did.**

Well, once again, I think it's subjective. If you've been through every email in the city, if you have had an opportunity to interview people from the staff here, from the church and you still can't come up with anything, then to me, what you feel is subjective. You know, your feelings are subjective because there's nothing you can point to that says anything you've done is wrong.

Now, let me take it a step forward and say that we live in a different world now. We live in a technological world. So a lot of our policies and procedures need to be updated to deal with that. Because, to think that people are not going to be using this technology for home, for civic engagement — I mean, it's just unrealistic. So our policies need to reflect that. If we stop people from using this equipment to, you know, do social media, we'd have to shut this place down. Everybody does it. So we have to update the policies or somebody will need to update the policies to reflect a more modern approach to it.

**When do you pack up the office?**

We're packing. We've got a few more days to get out of here. But we'll be ready.

## **Do you know what's on the horizon?**

I'm looking forward not to have to face the kind of schedule that I had. And some rest, reflection and imagine the future. You know, I don't think this is my last round.

## **Politically speaking?**

I don't think this is my last round.