

Expectations high for new Riviera Beach City Manager

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RIVIERA BEACH — New City Manager Ruth Jones will be greeted with big expectations when she moves into her office at city hall on June 22.

Some council members expect her to create jobs for residents, 20 percent of whom live below the poverty level.

Others think she should improve the accountability of departments and make government more efficient. State auditors recently criticized Riviera Beach for its vague contracts with consultants and lack of competitive bids for some purchases.

One of Jones' first jobs is indisputable. She will be forced to make tough budget-cutting recommendations as the city faces a 16 percent drop in property values for the budget year that begins Oct. 1.

The reduction in tax base is not as dramatic as in some other Palm Beach County cities, but it's enough that some of Riviera Beach's 544 employees could face layoffs, furloughs or cuts in benefits.

The city council agreed June 3 to hire Jones at an annual salary of \$150,000 plus insurance benefits, pension contributions and a \$500-a-month car allowance. Her salary will rise 7 percent if she receives a favorable evaluation from the council after six months. She replaces former City Manager Bill Wilkins, who resigned in September.

Resident Tamar Reno, who ran for mayor in March, said she was impressed by the preparations Jones made before her interview, including going into neighborhoods to speak with residents.

"She's the right combination of warm and tough," Reno said. "You'd want her in your corner, but you wouldn't want to cross her."

When Jones interviewed for the job, she was asked to name the city's most pressing problem.

Her answer: a lack of jobs for residents.

Solving the unemployment puzzle might be beyond the scope of the city government alone. Jones realizes the city can't create jobs or reach other goals without partners.

"It's all about building relationships," Jones said. "I definitely believe in public-private partnerships. I want to improve relationships and the way people see Riviera Beach."

Jones, 58, of Atlanta spent nearly nine years as assistant county manager for Georgia's Fulton County, where her duties included employee motivation, conducting effectiveness evaluations for county initiatives, monitoring spending by county departments and working with the county manager to develop budgets exceeding \$900 million.

Jones said she left Fulton County in December after a new county manager took over and brought in a new management team

"Riviera Beach is lucky to have her," said Valarie Wilson, former director of Fulton County's Department of Human Services. "She was one of the people we could always count on at the manager's office."

Jones grew up in Wichita, Kan., the oldest girl in a family of seven. Her father was a tool and die technician for Boeing. Her mother worked as a paraprofessional in the school system.

With a degree in elementary education, Jones began her career in 1973 as a special education teacher at Broadview Elementary School in Wichita. "Children and youth have always been near and dear to my heart," she said.

After earning a master's degree in personnel and guidance at Emporia State University, Jones worked as a counselor, recruiter and equal-opportunity director for several universities. She joined Fulton County in 1998 as director of equal opportunity and employee relations, became interim deputy county manager the next year and was tapped to be assistant county manager in 2000.

Jones, who is single, said her career evolved from teaching to public administration through "predestination" with the help of mentors. "It definitely was not career mapping," she said.

Jones sees Riviera Beach, as many do, as a place of unfulfilled potential. She believes her job, ultimately, is to improve the lives of people.

Resident Norma Duncombe, a former city council member, said Jones can improve the city if the city council will support her.

"They cannot underhandedly circumvent things she comes up with," Duncombe said. "They have to allow her to do the job."

Making significant changes in the city will take time, said Steve White, president of the West Side Civic Association who ran for city council in March.

"We're not expecting her to come in and work miracles," White said. "I'm excited about her coming. It's definitely a breath of fresh air for the city."

Setting the priorities

What Riviera Beach council members and the mayor want to see during Ruth Jones' first six months on the job:

- **'I would like to see Ms. Jones conduct an evaluation of each city department and make recommendations to improve efficiency, customer service, decrease overhead costs and, most importantly, address our financial management problems.'**

- Council Chairwoman Dawn Pardo

- **'We're not expecting Ms. Jones to turn the city around in six months, but I'm expecting a balanced budget and a clear direction of where she wants the city to go.'**

- Councilman Shelby Lowe

- **'I want to make sure she attacks our budget problems and that we are still able to operate with some type of ease in tough economic times.'**

- Councilman Cedrick Thomas

- **'As we look at the budget, I hope she can streamline the government. Let's see how we can be more efficient.'**

- Councilwoman Billie Brooks

- **'The first major thing is balancing the budget. That's going to require some tough decisions by her.'**

- Councilwoman Judy Davis

- **I would like to see a massive effort to put people back to work in Riviera Beach.'**

- Mayor Thomas Masters