

Richmond Awaits a Bold Antipoverty Plan



Khue Bui for The New York Times

Mayor Dwight C. Jones, in his second term, has set an ambitious agenda in Richmond, VA, which has a poverty rate of 26.3 percent.

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#)
Published: October 14, 2013

RICHMOND, Va. — Dressed on an unseasonably warm day, as ever, in a tailored suit, tie and pocket square, [Mayor Dwight C. Jones](#), a fourth-generation pastor, arrived at a late-afternoon meeting this month to talk about his ambitious — some say quixotic — plan to subdue poverty in this city, once the capital of the Confederacy and now one of the nation’s poorest urban areas.

“If this is something we can’t do,” he said, glancing around the room at members of one of the city’s seven antipoverty task forces, “we don’t deserve to be here.”

The plan, on which he is staking both his political capital and legacy, has the general support of the City Council but is making others jittery, rich and poor alike.

Emphasizing programs the city can afford on its \$760 million budget, Richmond is considering pairing every at-risk child ages 11 to 15 with an adult mentor; razing public housing and replacing it with mixed-income units with the option of



Jay Paul for The New York Times
Many Richmond residents live in public housing, but the mayor has been promoting mixed-income communities.

homeownership; setting up an intensive manufacturing training program that would give the unemployed the skills needed to work at one of the many local companies looking for workers; starting a farm-to-school program to promote adequate nutrition; and establishing an assistance program to help pay water and wastewater bills for low-income households.

The final ideas, and mechanisms to put them in action, are due at the mayor's office in early December.

"I've never seen a city embrace this at the highest levels," said Ted L. Howard, the executive director of the [Democracy Collaborative](#), an organization that focuses on community economic development efforts in cities nationwide. "There is an understanding here that institutions cannot succeed if the neighborhoods are collapsing."

Mr. Jones is at pains to emphasize that the ambitious antipoverty plan is no theoretical exercise — even with limited resources, a corporate community that has yet to give the initiative a public embrace, and a portion of the black population, which makes up the vast majority of the poor in Richmond, that also remains skeptical.

The mayor has named the project the [Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Fighting Poverty and Expanding Opportunity](#), after a [pioneering black businesswoman here](#) who was the country's first female bank president. Urban renewal experts across the country are watching closely. Many cities, including Richmond, are only now emerging from the recession and are reluctant to increase budgets to aid the poor, particularly amid the intense pressure to reduce public spending in Washington and in state capitals.

That Mr. Jones, a Democrat, is leading the charge with such vigor has surprised some Richmond residents who had complained that the second-term mayor lacked the political will to take on contentious issues, and was too cozy with the city's business community, long a dominant force in local politics.

But Mr. Jones, 65, said he had simply been waiting for the right moment. He grew comfortable with power, he said, while watching his father operate from the pulpit of his Philadelphia church and he was later steeped in [black liberation theology](#), which employs the Gospels to confront social ills, including racism.

"I understood power very early," said Mr. Jones, who was re-elected last November with 70 percent of the vote. "I understood — kind of almost organically understood — how power worked. I watched people. Churches are political places. I see my work here as a way to help people."

The city Mr. Jones runs remains divided in many ways. New high-rises are going up downtown. There are plans for a minor-league baseball stadium. And trendy restaurants and bars attract young college graduates who are moving into the city's new condominiums.

But across Interstate 95 on the city's East End, vacant lots and boarded-up houses are commonplace. Poverty in the city, concentrated in the East End, is at 26.3 percent, compared

with 15.9 percent nationally. Nearly half of Richmond's population of 210,000 lives in poverty or is at significant risk of falling into it.

Perhaps more dauntingly, 25 percent of the jobs in Richmond [pay less than \\$11.72 an hour](#) — the level economists say is needed to lift a family of four out of poverty.

Mr. Jones said that when he arrived from Philadelphia more than 40 years ago to attend Virginia Union, a historically black university, he had had no intention of staying. The city moved too slowly, he said, and although Richmond was no longer legally segregated, the racial lines were clear. He once took a young woman on a date to a movie theater that had previously been whites-only, but that African-Americans had continued to avoid. The woman, he said, was surprised and impressed by his choice, but as an outsider, he said, he had not known any better.



Jay Paul for The New York Times
Highland Grove is a mixed-income community that opened recently.

He had left Philadelphia to avoid the call to the pulpit that three generations of Joneses before him had heard. “I was trying to get away from it,” he said, unaware at the time of Virginia Union’s Baptist roots.

Mr. Jones eventually became senior pastor at the First Baptist Church of South Richmond, where he continues to preach once a month, though he has passed most church duties on to his son, [Derik Jones](#), 36, who was elected to the city’s school board in November. Mayor Jones also served on the city’s school board

as well as in the State House of Delegates.

Mr. Jones said his inclination had always been to be a conciliator.

“After the civil rights movement you had a choice — you could either continue to protest or you could make the decision to become integrated into the systems of government or the systems of business and maintain a commitment to help people rise above where they are,” he said. “And I found that I could do much more sitting around the table than I could do in other ways — so by being in the room, you really have an opportunity to make things happen.”

But the discussion, particularly the plan to tear down public housing, has created nervousness in Richmond’s poorest neighborhoods, even though Mr. Jones has said that no one will be left without a home. However, everyone who lives in the proposed new housing — some of which has been completed — will be required to work or undergo job training.

“By the time they finish with these mixed-income developments, the people living there now won’t be able to live there anymore,” said Spencer E. Jones III, 63, a lifelong Richmond resident.

In spite of the deep racial divisions in Richmond, Mr. Jones has managed to remain popular among both the wealthier white residents and the black population — nearly one-third of which lives in poverty. The business community, a key mayoral ally, has had a mixed response to the poverty initiative, however, as decisions about how to finance it from the city budget remain months away.

“It has been a bold move by the mayor and he’s been thoughtful about how he’s approached it,” said Greg Wingfield, the president and chief executive of the [Greater Richmond Partnership](#), a public-private regional economic development organization. “This isn’t a show horse kind of event for him. He has used his position to support a population that has traditionally not had a voice at the table.”

But a spokesman for the area’s biggest company, Altria — the parent firm of Philip Morris USA, the nation’s largest tobacco company — said that while Altria was “involved in many initiatives in the Richmond community,” it had “no direct involvement in the poverty initiative.”

With characteristic aplomb, Mr. Jones insisted he was unbothered.

“It’s like a rolling snowball,” he said, smiling. “We’ll pick up momentum as the ball goes down the hill. It didn’t happen overnight, it’s not going to change overnight.”