

Jax Young Voters Coalition

NEXT: Jax Young Voters Coalition founder takes stock of new group's successes, mistakes

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Bob Self/Staff Photographer

Bob.Self@jacksonville.com--1/29/15--Meredith O'Malley Johnson, the founder of the Jax Young Voters Coalition addresses the audience at Thursday morning's gathering. Board members of the Jax Young Voters Coalition, local politicians and interested spectators mingled beside Friendship Fountain Thursday morning as the group, that wants to get more of Jacksonville's young voters engaged in local politics, met for the first time. (The Florida Times-Union/Bob Self)

The Jax Young Voters Coalition was just an idea two months ago, but it's made a mark in some city political circles.

The group formed with the goal of increasing turnout among voters younger than 40 and impacting city decisions about subjects coalition leaders considered important for Jacksonville's future, including city spending on transportation and on arts and culture and whether city law should ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

Coalition founder Meredith O'Malley Johnson still was waiting Friday for an age breakdown of voters in Tuesday's "first election," which will be followed by a May 19 general election.

But the group helped some candidates come face-to-face with younger voters, and Johnson said it plans to stay engaged in local politics after May to advocate for some core issues, and to seek to remove political party labels from city elections.

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Johnson talked to the Times-Union about things she thinks the coalition did that have worked well in the last couple of months, and what it could have done better.

5 THINGS THAT JOHNSON THINKS THE COALITION DID RIGHT:

1. To have an impact, the first step was telling newbie voters some elections basics, like how to register and where to vote. Johnson said lots of the coalition's board received texts or online messages from people who used the group website, jaxyoungvoters.com, to know how to get started. The whole idea was to engage a group of people who hadn't been part of the election process, so some nuts-and-bolts education was important.
2. The group stirred interest and sparked a discussion that reached people of all sorts of political backgrounds. A crowdfunding campaign raised money from scores of supporters.
3. The group's Ballots & Brews social last month brought hundreds of young people together with candidates running for mayor and a crowd of hopefuls seeking votes for sheriff, City Council and other posts. That was followed last weekend by an event marking the end of early voting where the first 250 people could exchange the sticker showing they voted for a free-beer ticket donated by a law office.
4. Meaningful information is great, but Johnson said some quality graphic artwork helped make the group's website more accessible and helped bring people into its pages of voting rules and candidate profiles. A fist-bump logo from the website, for example, was printed on peel-off stickers, wall hangings and other that carried the group's name.
5. Like anyone trying to reach young people, the group counted on social media to help members spread the word.

"We've had hundreds of thousands of impressions on Twitter and Instagram," Johnson said.

5 THINGS THE GROUP COULD'VE DONE BETTER:

1. Johnson said the group, which announced itself Jan. 29, started too late. Members were glad for the traction they got, she said, but starting earlier would have allowed time to build more of a following.
2. Holding more events would have helped the group connect with young people in a broader area, Johnson said. The Beaches and parts of the Southside would have been easy places to stage gatherings like Ballots & Brews, but the group didn't hold any events outside the city center.
3. Having a larger volunteer team would have helped tackle bigger projects, Johnson said.
4. Johnson said she wished the group's website carried questions and position statements from mayoral candidates before Tuesday's first election. That information about Mayor Alvin Brown and challenger Lenny Curry will be online before they face off in the general election.

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5. Volunteer committees that work on the coalition had times when they needed to communicate better between each other, she said. The coalition has 22 board members and some other volunteers who help out, and it could be easy to lose track of who was handling which tasks.

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