

A NEW
CIVIC COVENANT

**JACKSON
READY**

TO STEP > FORWARD



A Report for The Community Foundation for Mississippi
Prepared by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that equips people, organizations, communities, and networks with the tools to bridge divides, build capacity, and tackle shared challenges. The Harwood Institute's work is rooted in a philosophy of Civic Faith and the practice of Turning Outward. Founded in 1988, the Institute partners with some of the world's largest nonprofits, and its approach has spread to all 50 states across the US and 40 countries around the world.



The Community Foundation for Mississippi is a community foundation that has been helping communities harness their philanthropic potential since 1994. Committed to community, excellence, integrity, expertise, and constancy, they help communities identify new ways to use their financial, social, and intellectual capital. They support communities across Mississippi through meaningful partnerships with donors, businesses, nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and sister community foundations.

THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC INNOVATION

4915 St. Elmo St., Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814

Tel: 301-656-3669
Fax: 301-656-0533

info@theharwoodinstitute.org
www.theharwoodinstitute.org

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A NEW CIVIC COVENANT

Talk to a cross-section of leaders in Jackson, MS, and a clear story of resilience, hope, and frustration emerges along with the urgent desire to make real and lasting progress for the community. But to make such progress, the people of Jackson must step forward and forge new and stronger relationships and a can-do spirit.

At the core of these relationships sits a covenant—a new civic covenant—with one another. A civic covenant is about how we choose to engage with one another, take shared responsibility for producing a stronger, more inclusive community, and step forward to work together to get things done. It is rooted in the belief that no single leader, organization or group can achieve a community's goals on their own. We need each other.

The good news is that a new civic covenant is emerging in Jackson.

In the summer of 2019, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, in partnership with the Community Foundation for Mississippi, interviewed 25 community leaders to learn about their aspirations and concerns for the city, and then convened these leaders for a daylong meeting at The Two Museums. The goals of the meeting were to:

- Discuss critical issues that need to be addressed by the community to reach people's shared aspirations—including race, equity, and inclusion

- Identify current underlying conditions that shape Jackson, including the community's norms, narrative and obstacles, along with existing assets to build upon
- Name signs of progress that will give people in the community a sense of possibility and hope that any new effort is producing real and promising results
- Generate principles for moving forward together

This report details the outcomes of our interviews and the convening and provides a roadmap for next steps.

The only way to make progress is to move forward with greater common purpose guided and shaped by a new civic covenant. Only the people of Jackson can forge this path forward together.

It's time.

Richard C. Harwood

President & Founder

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

JACKSON READY TO STEP FORWARD

The city of Jackson, Mississippi has a rich history—a history that many people take great pride in, but also lament. While many of the contours of Jackson’s story are unique, Jackson is not unlike many other American cities. There is a complicated, deeply layered, and ever-unfolding story of seemingly intractable challenges of race and class. These challenges are intertwined with a host of social, political and economic concerns.

The question is how to move forward?

What’s clear is that there are no quick fixes. When describing the city, one Jackson community leader said, “‘Fractured’ is the word that comes to mind.” Negativity and mistrust also persist. The lack of concrete change and sustainable efforts often lead to even greater frustration, even deep anger among some. This history clouds people’s hope that meaningful and lasting change can come to Jackson.

Indeed many community leaders spoke about projects that get started and suddenly stop or stall out. Others talked about the lack of coordination between groups and organizations, burnout among civic leaders, and political logjams that take the steam out of good ideas. Meanwhile, it seems too many people are waiting for a single individual or moment to somehow transform the community.

At the same time, quite a few of the community leaders said that Jackson has a history of being resilient. People here bounce back and recover quickly as conditions shift and evolve. Amid a rash of challenges, there remains an optimism. The people of Jackson collectively remember better days, but long for an even better, brighter future. They yearn for better schools, more opportunities, and a sense of common purpose and interconnectedness.

Claiming this future will require taking a new path on which the community effectively marshals its shared resources. As one community leader put it, quoting former Mississippi Governor William Winter, “Mississippi doesn’t lack good work. Mississippi lacks good people doing good work together.” In these conversations, the community leaders said it’s time for Jackson to move forward, together.

“Mississippi doesn’t lack good work. Mississippi lacks good people doing good work together.”

KEY INSIGHTS

Below are key insights and findings from the interviews and convening with the 25 community leaders from across Jackson. These are not intended to be definitive, nor to close off conversation, but rather they are meant to catalyze further discussion, collaboration, and ultimately action.

» **People hold a deep affection for Jackson.** Many community leaders pointed to Jackson's "small-town feel," sense of community, and good people. The city has numerous assets, including higher education institutions, thriving arts and culture, and its geographic position, as well as being the state's capital.

» **The community is beset by numerous challenges, with some seen as being taboo to raise.** Race and class are first among these. What's more, the community's redevelopment is uneven, deep economic disparities exist, and widespread segregation persists. Some communities are building gates that further divide people. There is a lack of critical services for people and a lack of access to services that do exist. The city suffers from a significant flight of people and businesses, crumbling infrastructure and potholes, and inadequate resources.

» **The public school system needs improvement.** Community leaders emphasized the need for strong, sustained leadership to improve local schools and the need to hire skilled, local teachers. They want better early childhood education. These leaders often expressed how the school system seems structurally designed to fail, due to white flight, the rise of private schools, and the small tax base, among other reasons.

» **The community needs to provide greater support to the public schools.** Over and over, leaders expressed the need for sustained commitment from the community to support the public schools, and that the community needs to know how they can do this. Many leaders said that there are groups and individuals are working on this now, but more are needed. The schools cannot succeed without the community.

» **Children and youth need support outside of school.** Social isolation is a big problem. Children and youth need opportunities to learn and have fun. Being and feeling safe are essential. Relationships and friendships need to be established across community divides. Reliable transportation and access will be an important factor in this effort.

» **Many people feel overwhelmed by these challenges.** The magnitude and complexity of the challenges in the city make people feel overwhelmed. There's widespread fragmentation, a lack of knowledge between and among different actors/groups, and missing dialogue that includes people in shaping the direction of their community. Far too little progress gets made. Hope is diminished.

» **Smaller changes are happening, but there's a need for greater momentum.** People point to positive changes taking place. For instance, there are signs of progress in particular neighborhoods and parts of downtown. But these efforts alone are not producing a sense of sustained momentum. What's more, things get started, but too often stop. Burnout occurs.

» **A commitment to the common good needs to replace individual complaints.** While the community clearly cares about the challenges it faces, there is an ingrained habit of complaining about problems and a focus on people's individual needs. A greater focus on the common good must grow and be sustained.

» **A sense of shared direction is necessary.** To take effective action, there must be more agreement about what to do about the community's challenges, where best to get started, and how to bring together different leaders, groups, and efforts.

» **Stop looking for the quick fix.** Many of the community leaders asserted that in order to move forward, the community must stop looking for the quick fix, easy formulas for success, and magic solutions.

FOCUSING ON WHAT WE "CAN DO"

When discussing these insights, the conversation at the convening quickly turned to all the reasons why the community can't and won't make progress. It was a telling moment. Like so many conversations in Jackson, this conversation had returned to what blocks progress rather than how to generate progress. At that moment, the group created two lists: a "Can't Do" and an alternate "Can Do" list. Here are the two lists juxtaposed to one another.

"CAN'T DO"

- ⓧ We can't send our kids to public school
- ⓧ We can't go to "that part of town"
- ⓧ We can't find adequate public transit
- ⓧ We can't trust each other
- ⓧ We can't invest in Jackson
- ⓧ We can't escape violence
- ⓧ We can't attract businesses
- ⓧ We can't provide for family
- ⓧ We can't walk the city
- ⓧ We can't get state support for Jackson



- We can follow through and build sustainable efforts
- We can take shared responsibility for helping expose others to all of Jackson's neighborhoods—particularly the most forgotten
- We can treat one another better
- We can engender a culture of transparency—so that benchmarks are made public and accountability becomes a part of the culture
- We can celebrate our successes—to build and grow our civic pride
- We can serve as ambassadors of a new narrative—to tell a different story about Jackson, one that highlights the unfolding story of positive change across Jackson
- We can take action, together

As this conversation unfolded, it became apparent that the challenge in moving forward is not to mimic other communities, look for answers developed by those outside the city, or wait for a single leader to "save" the community. Jackson must create its own future.

Along the way, some efforts will work, while others won't. But the community must keep moving forward, always. This will require working together in a new way. The community leaders at this convening were clear that this will take a "can do" spirit.

AN EMERGING NEW CIVIC COVENANT

At the close of the day-long convening, the community leaders were asked what it would take for them and others in the community to forge productive relationships, trust, and mutual accountability—all to be nurtured and fostered by the group. They agreed that nothing substitutes for the relational nature of community and society.

These are the commitments they made to one another in moving forward together:

-  **Be ambitious**
-  **Focus on achievable results**
-  **Commit to open, honest dialogue**
-  **Be open to creative approaches**
-  **Show up and actively participate**
-  **Get comfortable saying “I don’t know”**
-  **Ensure everyone has an equal voice in the conversation**
-  **Serve as a strong support system**
-  **Use positive language when talking to one another and when talking about Jackson**

A PATH FORWARD

With this emerging civic covenant in mind, here are six steps to put Jackson on a more inclusive, hopeful path:

- 1 Strengthen the community’s good works.** Existing good efforts—of which there are many— must be actively supported, nurtured and then expanded. It would be easy to turn one’s attention solely to new efforts, but that would be a mistake. Progress will be made by building on and celebrating what already works.
- 2 Develop and support leaders who want to get things done together.** Community leaders believe Jackson must develop many more leaders who are willing to work collaboratively and who will see their efforts through. Such leaders need to be actively cultivated and developed—this must be a priority. But merely developing more of these leaders and sending them off on their own will not produce the desired results. These leaders will face tough challenges, resistance, even efforts to pull them down; they will need to be continually brought together over time to share ideas, learn from one another, innovate together, and find ways to support one another. This is not about coordinating all of their actions, but rather creating a network of leaders that can help to propel the community forward.
- 3 Get people talking about their shared aspirations and concerns.** It is not possible for any community to make meaningful strides forward through a recitation of problems and grievances. People must begin to talk about their shared aspirations and what it will take for them to step forward with others to take intentional actions that will move the community forward.
- 4 Focus on actionable, doable and achievable steps.** People across Jackson are skeptical about “change” efforts as far too many have started and stopped, often without explanation. People’s civic confidence is low. The only way to alter this reality is to provide

clear, concrete proof points—through a collection of small achievable efforts—that demonstrate change is possible. And the only way for this new path to be truly believable is to demonstrate such actions over time. On this path, the community should not take on all of Jackson’s challenges at once, promise that any single project or process will somehow upend the negative conditions in the community, nor believe that their efforts will turn the community around overnight. Such promises will only serve to generate greater skepticism, even cynicism. Instead, the community should identify small steps that are actionable, doable and achievable.

5 Bridge divides that keep people separated.

Throughout the conversations, community leaders talked about the various divides across the community. A priority should be placed on finding shared community efforts that people can work on together, that can be highlighted and that can help develop mutual understanding and civic confidence.

6 Create a can-do narrative. There is a deeply ingrained negative narrative in Jackson about the city. A community’s shared narrative is the greatest hidden factor as to whether a community moves forward or not. Narratives drive our individual and collective mindsets, attitudes, behaviors and actions. A positive “can do” narrative helps people feel and see that they are on a more promising trajectory. Negative narratives shift as evidence of positive change emerges over time.

Taking these six steps, together, can help put Jackson on a new trajectory, with growing momentum and stronger civic confidence. It is necessary that these pieces move in concert in order to create the necessary conditions to get on a more hopeful path.

STEPPING FORWARD

Jackson, like so many other communities in America today, is at a crossroads. The city is a place of goodwill and good people. The goal now is to harness this goodwill and the community’s collective resources to get on a more hopeful path. This requires that people step forward, together.

Over the next few months, the Community Foundation for Mississippi will be advancing its efforts to help Jackson get on this new path in partnership with The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. In early 2020, The Harwood Institute will hold a Public Innovators Lab, where it will train approximately 75 community members in the practice of Turning Outward — a practice that enables communities to become a collective force for change. From this training will emerge groups of public innovators who are prepared to drive collective action across Jackson. These efforts will expressly recognize, celebrate and build upon the good work already taking place in Jackson.

Throughout this report are the insights from community leaders who are yearning for a brighter tomorrow for Jackson. They have stepped forward and are committed to put Jackson on a more promising path—for all the people of Jackson.





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