



Credit: Courtesy of City of Cleveland.

Cleveland native Frank G. Jackson, the city's longest-serving mayor, has been an advocate for building equity and opportunity in this postindustrial city since taking office in 2006. Mayor Jackson is a lifelong resident of the Central neighborhood, where he began his career in elected office as a City Council member. He later served as City Council president.

A graduate of Cleveland public schools, Cuyahoga Community College, and Cleveland State University—from which he earned bachelor's, master's, and law degrees—Jackson began his public service career as an assistant city prosecutor in the Cleveland Municipal Court Clerk's Office.

During his tenure as mayor, Jackson has focused on helping residents and businesses benefit from investments occurring in the city and on advancing the Downtown Lakefront Development Plan. He also spearheaded Sustainable Cleveland 2019, a 10-year initiative designed to build a stronger regional economy, encourage sustainable business practices, and improve air and water quality in this former manufacturing hub.

## Reflecting on Equity and Regeneration in Cleveland

Mayor Jackson recently spoke with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint for a series of conversations with mayors of cities that are especially significant to the history of the Lincoln Institute. The series is part of the organization's 75th anniversary celebration. An edited transcript follows; the full interview is available as a *Land Matters* podcast at [www.lincolnst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos](http://www.lincolnst.edu/publications/podcasts-videos).

**ANTHONY FLINT:** *When our founder, inventor and entrepreneur John C. Lincoln, got his start in the late 1800s, Cleveland was a booming place, arguably right up there with New York and Chicago, an incredible mix of innovation and jobs and homes and neighborhoods. Could you reflect on how that legacy has been on your mind as you've governed Cleveland over the last 15 years?*

**FRANK JACKSON:** Well, it's always good to know history so you can put yourself in the right frame of mind and have perspective. Cleveland was a booming place, with the Rockefellers and the [economic successes] of the Industrial Revolution . . . We were ideally located in terms of our ability to be a hub for the distribution of goods and materials throughout the Midwest. So we reflect back on those heydays, fully recognizing that what brought us to that moment is no longer here . . . and that there needs to be a relooking at where Cleveland is now and what could position Cleveland to be in a similar situation as a hub for economic opportunity and prosperity and quality of life.

**AF:** *At the statue in Public Square, former Mayor Tom Johnson is shown seated with his hand on a copy of Progress and Poverty by Henry George. Cleveland is where John Lincoln first heard George speak. Why do you think Cleveland was so receptive to the ideas of George, who believed the value of land should belong to everyone?*

**FJ:** I couldn't tell you for sure, but as you know, the body takes its direction from its head . . . and I think Tom L. Johnson was a mayor with progressive thoughts and with the fortitude to execute and implement [ideas]. So he wasn't just a conversationalist, he actually did things. This transition that Cleveland was in then—fast-forward, and we're in the same transitional kind of period now. The Industrial Revolution produced a certain level of prosperity and wealth, but also produced a certain social condition . . . that I believe that progressive era was attempting to change to create more equitable outcomes.

I admit I didn't really study Mr. George's philosophy. But what I do understand is this progressive notion of land use, and how land should not be controlled by a few entities that determine what happens. There should be broader input into what happens on that land.

**AF:** *As the city has steadily emerged from a period of decline and population loss during the second half of the 20th century, what have been the critical elements of its regeneration? What catalysts are you most hopeful about?*

**FJ:** Well, it's how you position yourself, how does Cleveland position itself for the future. . . . I look at it as, how do we have a sustainable economy? How do we deliver goods and services and how do we get into sustainable industries [like electric vehicles] . . . All of this includes technology, all of it includes education, all of it includes research and development. All these things are inclusive of each other. So there's not one thing we can pick and say we're going to do.

I think we need to go back to what Mr. George was talking about and what Tom L. Johnson was trying to do, which is to say that [progress] is only sustainable if we have equity, and if we eliminate the disparities and inequities in the way our social, political, and economic systems function. And as you know, particularly around the social unrest these days, if we fail to address issues of classism and racism, then all our efforts will be doomed.

Once an industrial powerhouse, Cleveland experienced decades of economic decline during the 20th century. Credit: benkrut via iStock/Getty Images Plus.



**AF:** *Race and economic development are very much on every mayor's mind these days, especially now that the pandemic has revealed so much entrenched inequity. What are some of the most effective ways Cleveland has addressed historic segregation and racial disparities?*

**FJ:** Before I answer that, let me just say that whatever we have done is not sufficient, because all of these things are institutionalized. . . . We've gone to the point of declaring violence and poverty as public health issues. We've gone to the point of establishing a new division in the Department of Health around social justice. We're trying to institutionalize some things.

We have also attempted to work with our private sector partners to address inequities, disparity, and racism within their organizations, helping to have a better outcome in terms of contracting for goods and services with lending institutions. Even though redlining is illegal, the actual practice of how investments are made and moneys are lent and developments occur is basically redlining. So we try to work with [private sector partners] to help them . . . take a risk where they normally would not take a risk.

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That can only happen if you allow for wealth to occur among those who have traditionally been denied wealth. If you have leadership and career opportunities for those who had traditionally been denied those opportunities. So those are the kinds of things that we work on.

The real thing is what is the *culture* of Cleveland. How does Cleveland function, and what is its attitude toward these things. And that's a behavioral thing that bureaucracy cannot really regulate.

**AF:** *Can you tell us about recent zoning reform measures aimed at reducing barriers to housing production and other local economic activity?*

Cleveland residents at a neighborhood street fair. The population of the city is 381,000 today, compared to a high of nearly 915,000 in 1950. Credit: Mark Kanning/Alamy Stock Photo.



*How important are these rules and regulations to regeneration, and how has Cleveland made innovative use of vacant and abandoned land?*

**FJ:** As you know, land use is key. . . . We're moving toward having zoning more aligned with people and multiple mobility, the kind of approach where there's bikes, cars, scooters, walking, jogging. In that context, trying to create that type of city, it's very important to have zoning that will accommodate that and will accommodate it in a way that [minimizes conflict].

When I first came into government, there was no new housing development in Cleveland. . . . As a result of the negative impacts of federal and state policy around redlining and urban renewal and then the social impact of riots, [we had] acres and acres of vacant land in the central city, predominantly in African American communities. . . . Mayor [Michael White, who led the city from 1990 to 2001] was really a genius in this regard. He worked with the financial institutions and developers to create a network of neighborhood nonprofits whose primary purpose was to redevelop land for housing and to redevelop land at all price ranges, that would make it affordable. I'm familiar with it because I was councilman of Central, where I still live, which probably had the most negative impacts.

We continue this effort today with Recovery Act money; we're getting \$511 million and we're working with the private sector to develop tools. We're not talking about a project or initiative, we're developing tools. What we're working on now to really connect all these dots . . . a lot of that has to do with land and with the availability of land, whether it's lakefront or empty office space downtown or warehouses, old industrial sites that need environmental cleanup. It's not just housing, but also, how do we create entrepreneurship, commercial strips, retail strips that still have the bones—how do we bring them back and have ownership of goods and services being provided to the community by the people in that community or by someone who looks like the people of that community?

**AF:** *Well, if there's one thing that Cleveland has, it's good bones, right?*

**FJ:** That's exactly right. One of the things that culturally came out of that period that you talked about, the heyday of Cleveland, was Severance Hall [home of the Cleveland Orchestra], the museums, the whole University Circle area. . . . Now we're trying to use old industrial sites and lakefront or riverfront property in a new way since it's no longer used for commerce . . . [but] a freeway, railroad tracks, those kinds of things [are] almost impossible to remove, but they're barriers. So how do you overcome those barriers? One of the things we're looking at is a land bridge that would allow for green space and access to the riverfront, the lakefront, and to always have public access and not have private ownership of the waterfront.

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**AF:** *Sounds like there's a lot of reimagining going on.*

**FJ:** That's the advantage to where Cleveland is now. To have a blank canvas, so to speak, gives us that opportunity. Now the question is whether or not we mess it up. . . . I've maintained that whatever we do, it will never be sustainable if we don't address the underlying issues that are really the issues of America: institutionalized inequity, disparities, racism, and classism, which has a lot to do with land. □

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