



CIVIL RIGHTS

POLITICS

Comptroller to take over majority-Black town of Mason, ahead of Ford investment in west Tennessee

BY: **ANITA WADHWANI** - MARCH 15, 2022 12:51 PM



Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumpower said Tuesday that he will be taking control of the finances of Mason, Tenn. a majority Black town of about 1,500 people located within five miles of the future site Blue Oval City, the Ford electric truck and battery plant that represents one of the largest manufacturing investments in the state's history.

“I’m sad for the taxpayers of Mason,” he said. “We will be working hard to step in and get their finances in shape.”

The Comptroller’s move comes over the objections of Mason’s elected officials, [who have been fighting to maintain control](#) over their town since Mumpower issued an ultimatum last month: either cede control of Mason’s 153-year-old charter or face a financial takeover by the state.

Relinquishing its charter would have placed the majority Black, majority Democrat town under control of largely White and Republican-led Tipton County. On Monday night, the town’s Board of Aldermen, in an emergency meeting, passed a resolution to keep their charter, Vice Mayor Virginia Rivers said Tuesday.

It was that decision that the Comptroller said led him to act. Mumpower’s staff will likely finalize their takeover plans by the end of the week.

“This has always been a decision for the (Mason) Board of Aldermen to make,” Mumpower said.


A financial takeover will give the Comptroller veto power over every expense of \$100 or more, limiting the authority of elected officials to embark on plans already underway to implement beautification projects, improve infrastructure and hire a codes enforcer. Benefit, workforce and other budget cuts may soon follow.



Rivers said Tuesday that neither she nor any other local official had received any word from Mumpower on the planned takeover. Mason’s elected officials will meet as soon as they can to weigh any next steps, she said.

Rivers last week likened the Comptroller’s efforts to take control from Mason’s duly elected officials as “akin to a hostile take-over,” coming just as Mason is poised to reap the benefits from billions of dollars in investments in the region from Ford.

Mason, which occupies fewer than two square miles, lies just 4.5 miles from the newly planned Interstate-40 off ramp that will bring interstate traffic directly to Blue Oval City. Highway 79, which links Blue Oval to Memphis, runs right past Mason’s small central district. And CSX railroad runs directly through the town on a route that will take it straight to the Blue Oval campus.

 Virginia Rivers, vice-mayor of Mason, Tenn. (Photo: John Partipilo)

“There’s no way Mason won’t prosper and grow,” Rivers said. “And now they want to take it away from us.”

Mumpower has pointed to a 20-year history of fiscal mismanagement by town leaders that has left it with deep debt and crumbling infrastructure. Mason leaders, he said, are ill prepared to take advantage of growth and new investments to come with Blue Oval City.

Mason officials have pushed back on Mumpower’s assessment. The town ended up in a half-million-dollar financial hole caused in large part by fraud and embezzlement during prior administrations, Rivers said. Rivers said she and other officials have been working hard to pay off debts accrued under those previous administrations.

Rivers and other town officials have questioned why Mumpower or other state officials did not intervene before now. Mason, which still serves as home to descendants of freed slaves, was led by White officials for more than a century. The town’s first Black Mayor, Gwen Kilpatrick, assumed office in 2015 after allegations of fraud and mismanagement led to the resignations of nearly all City Hall officials, who were White. Mason residents have elected Black leaders ever since. Mason’s current mayor, vice mayor and five of its six alderman are Black.

On Tuesday, Mumpower said he acted after “a lot of empty promises over the years” from town officials to get on a surer financial footing. The city’s tax rate is the highest in the county, yet residents receive few services, he said. City officials have relied on income from their utility district budget for their general fund, contrary to Tennessee law. Paying back the improper utility budget transfer is Mumpower’s first priority, he said. We will “immediately pay (that) back as quickly as possible,” he said.

Mumpower will also immediately review or eliminate discretionary spending and require town officials to submit financial statements on a weekly basis, he said.

“Every expense will have to be viewed or reviewed by the Comptroller,” Mumpower said.

Taking control of finances from local elected officials is a rare, but not unprecedented step, in Tennessee. Van Buren County has been under the financial oversight of the Comptroller since 2020. The town of Jellico, in Campbell County, was under the financial control of the Comptroller between 2013 and 2018. In the late 1980s or 1990s, according to a spokesman, Polk County was under similar oversight.

“The vast majority of Tennessee cities and counties adhere to corrective action plans and work to correct their financial issues before it gets to this point,” said John Dunn, the spokesman.



An open-ended scenario with no specific benchmarks in place to return power to local officials troubles Van Turner, president of the Memphis NAACP Branch and a member of the organization’s legal redress committee. “We need a timeline of how long this is going to take and what specific metrics they are using,” he said.

The Comptroller's authority to take financial control of cities and counties rests in a provision of [Tennessee law](#), which says, in part, that he "shall have the power and the authority to direct the governing body of the local government to adjust its estimates or to make additional tax levies."

How long the Comptroller's oversight will last – and under what specific conditions it ends – are decisions the Comptroller will ultimately make, Dunn said.

"In the past, we have not set an end date for our oversight," Dunn said. "Our approvals typically are required until we are confident that the town is set up for financial success."

But an open-ended takeover with no specific benchmarks in place to return power to local elected officials is the very scenario that troubles Van Turner, president of the Memphis NAACP Branch and a member of the Tennessee Conference of the NAACP legal redress committee, which is providing support to Mason officials. Without benchmarks and a timeline, Turner said, he believes that citizens and local officials have grounds for a lawsuit.

"We need a timeline of how long this is going to take and what specific metrics they are using before they transfer power back to Mason," he said. "Because it can't go on forever. That would be an indirect taking of its charter."

"Each city in our state should be given the ability to rule itself," Turner said. "Citizens need to have financial control returned to them because it's they who pay taxes and elect their representatives. We would just hope it's not some sort of grab so the state is receiving revenues and opportunities" from the arrival of Ford's manufacturing campus.

"This is a very concerning issue for the NAACP," he said. "The mayor is Black. The majority there are African-Americans. They are, in fact, going to be controlled by state officials who do not hold their values."



📷 Tennessee Comptroller Jason Mumpower. (Photo: Tennessee Office of the Comptroller)

Read more:

[‘This is akin to a hostile takeover’ State officials ask residents of small, predominantly Black town near the site of new Ford investment to forfeit their charter or face takeover.](#)

[REPUBLIC](#)

Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our web site. Please see our republishing guidelines for use of photos and graphics.



ANITA WADHWANI



Anita Wadhvani is a senior reporter for the Tennessee Lookout. The Tennessee AP Broadcasters and Media (TAPME) named her Journalist of the Year in 2019 as well as giving her the Malcolm Law Award for Investigative Journalism. Wadhvani is formerly an investigative reporter with The Tennessean who focused on the impact of public policies on the people and places across Tennessee. She is a graduate of Columbia University in New York and the University of California at Berkeley School of Journalism. Wadhvani lives in Nashville with her partner and two children.

MORE FROM AUTHOR

RELATED NEWS



'This is akin to a hostile takeover'

BY ANITA WADHWANI

March 14, 2022



Biden's State of the Union address

BY STATES NEWSROOM

March 1, 2022

KEEPING OUR EYES ON THE VOLUNTEER STATE

DEMOCRACY TOOLKIT



Now more than ever, tough and fair journalism is important. The Tennessee Lookout is your watchdog, telling the stories of politics and policy that affect the people of the Volunteer State.

[Ethics Policy](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Our stories may be republished online or in print under Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. We ask that you edit only for style or to shorten, provide proper attribution and link to our web site.



© Tennessee Lookout, 2022