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The Florida Times-Union

Friday, June 15, 2018

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Where will the Landing land?



The Jacksonville Landing opened to big crowds in 1987, but interest has dwindled since then amid widespread store vacancies and aging facilities. Sleiman Enterprises, which owns the mall buildings, has said if the city won't partner financially on redevelopment, Sleiman will continue to operate the property as a mall. [BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

Mayor favors replacing tired mall with a park, but first the city has to win in court

By David Bauerlein
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Out with the copper, in with the green.

Mayor Lenny Curry's vision for the riverfront land occupied by the Jacksonville Landing would transform the property by tearing down the copper-roofed mall and replacing it with acres of green park space and two smaller buildings for commercial activity such as a rooftop bar.

The concept would turn the property into a "riverfront plaza," said Brian Hughes, chief of staff for Curry.

"It serves as a front lawn for the core of downtown and includes a beautiful public space to celebrate our riverfront," Hughes said in a statement.

It's just a vision however, because nothing can happen to The Landing without the agreement of the Sleiman family, which owns the mall's buildings and is battling the city in court over the Landing's fate.

Sleiman Enterprises said in a statement that it has always wanted to enter into

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Mayor Lenny Curry proposes to demolish the Jacksonville Landing and turn most of the property into a riverfront plaza with trails and fountains. The site would have two buildings for commercial activity, including a rooftop bar. Curry wants to evict the Sleiman family from ownership of The Landing so the city can take full control over redevelopment. [RENDERINGS FROM CITY OF JACKSONVILLE.]



Sleiman Enterprises, which owns the Jacksonville Landing, favors a redevelopment plan put forward in 2015 by the Downtown Investment Authority. The plan would raze the Landing and build a 300-unit apartment building and a second building for use as a hotel or museum. Sleiman wants to do the redevelopment in financial partnership with the city.

Watchdog: No bias in Comey probe

Report says handling of Clinton email investigation was flawed, but not politically motivated

By Eric Tucker and Chad Day
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a stinging report, the Justice Department watchdog said Thursday that former FBI Director James Comey was "insubordinate" in his handling of the Hillary Clinton email investigation during the 2016 presidential election. But it also concluded there was no evidence that Comey was motivated by political bias.

President Donald Trump has looked to the hotly anticipated report to provide a fresh line of attack against Comey and the FBI as he claims that a politically tainted bureau tried to undermine his campaign

and — through the later Russia investigation — his presidency.

Clinton and her supporters, on the other hand, have complained that Comey's later announcement, shortly before the election, that the investigation was being reopened badly hurt her chances to defeat her Republican rival.

But the nuanced findings provide no conclusions to support either Republicans or Democrats who want to claim total vindication.

The inspector general's report concluded that Comey, who announced in the summer of 2016 that Clinton would not be charged with any crime in the email probe, departed from normal Justice Department protocol numerous times.

But it also says, "We found no evidence that the

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Land swap plan draws more critics

By Steve Patterson
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A conservation nonprofit set up by the administration of former Jacksonville Mayor John Delaney on Thursday denounced a plan that Delaney supports to allow development in part of the Julington-Durbin Preserve.

The board of the Timucuan Parks Foundation asked in a resolution that Gov. Rick Scott and the Cabinet, as well as the St. Johns River Water Management District's governing board, deny a developer's plan to swap 403 acres in the preserve for an equal area in Black Hammock Island.

"This is a fight that was

already fought and won. And the land was preserved and we should not have to do this again," said Barbara Goodman, a foundation board member and retired superintendent of the National Park Service's Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve.

Black Hammock Island faces the Timucuan, and Goodman said she'd love to see property there preserved — but not by trading government-protected land in the Julington-Durbin peninsula.

"I don't believe a swap is in any way a solution or an answer to anything," Goodman said. She said trading a big piece

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"... I realize that some of my beloved friends in the environmental community want both parcels preserved. I do too. Unfortunately, that is not the option being presented."

Former Jacksonville Mayor John Delaney said Thursday by email

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of the 2,000-acre preserve would encourage other businesses to try to develop preserved land, and would suggest "there's no such thing as protected status."

Bartram Park developer Tom Dodson wants to exchange Black Hammock land in Jacksonville's relatively undeveloped northeastern corner to get back a part of the Julington-Durbin land he sold to the state in 2001.

Dodson said last week he wants to build up to 1,400 homes on uplands in the Julington-Durbin Preserve, the same number he took off the table when he sold the property near the St. Johns County line.

The land, off Bartram Park Boulevard, is in a prime real estate market where about 7,000 homes and apartments have already been built.

Conservationists celebrated when the Julington-Durbin land was preserved under a \$16.9 million deal that included about \$4.2 million from the city.

But Delaney, who was mayor when the land was preserved, has embraced Dodson's plan, and was quoted as a supporter in a written statement issued last week by Dodson's



A fence separates homes in the Bartram Park community from the portion of the Julington-Durbin Creek peninsula that developer Tom Dodson wants to develop. [BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

company.

That brought criticism from people he worked with previously on land preservation, including St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman.

Delaney said Thursday by email that, "my personal opinion as a conservationist is that Black Hammock is really worth saving and that the tradeoff is more than worth it."

"... I realize that some of my beloved friends in the environmental community want both parcels preserved. I do too," he said. "Unfortunately, that is not the option being presented."

Delaney, who retired this spring as president of the University of North Florida, has agreed to work at the Rogers Towers law firm and the Fiorentino Group, a lobbying and government

relations company that Dodson's company employs.

An April announcement of these jobs said Delaney would join the firms June 1, but he has since said he has not started working there yet and that he was not speaking as a lobbyist.

"I have no idea if I will be involved with this or not," Delaney said of Dodson's swap plan.

The foundation, originally named Preservation Project Jacksonville, Inc., was created as a nonprofit to help the land-saving Preservation Project initiative Delaney launched when he was at City Hall. Delaney was the nonprofit's first president.

The foundation's resolution argued the swap Dodson suggests — no formal proposal has been filed yet — doesn't meet the standards

state law sets for public agencies to hand over conservation land.

And board member Warren Anderson, an attorney, said the process of hearings and votes needed to release the land could be fertile ground for court challenges that could delay or derail the swap.

Anderson is also a board member of the Public Trust Environmental Legal Institute of Florida, a nonprofit he said was created partly to protect the Preservation Project and its goals. He said he plans to talk to other Legal Institute board members about the land swap, and that he thought protecting Julington-Durbin could become a "high priority" for the legal nonprofit.

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PROBE

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conclusions by the prosecutors were affected by bias or other improper considerations; rather, we determined that they were based on the prosecutors' assessment of the facts, the law and past department practice."

Trump is certain to try to use the report to validate his firing of Comey last year, an act that is central to special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into whether the president sought to obstruct justice.

But the report will likely deny the president a favored talking point that the FBI favored Clinton over him and that its leaders were driven by politics. It does not second-guess the FBI's conclusion that Clinton should not have been prosecuted, despite repeated assertions by Trump and his supporters that anyone less politically connected than she would have been charged.

The conclusions were contained in a 500-page report that document in painstaking detail one of the most consequential investigations in modern FBI history and reveal how the bureau, which for decades has endeavored to stand apart from politics, came to be entangled in the 2016 presidential election.

The report alleges a long series of misjudgments that Democrats will likely use to support their belief that Clinton was wronged

by the FBI.

The watchdog faults Comey for his unusual July 5, 2016, news conference at which he disclosed his recommendation against bringing charges. Charging announcements are normally made by the Justice Department, not the FBI. Cases that end without charges are rarely discussed publicly.

In this instance, Comey said that the FBI found Clinton and her aides to be "extremely careless" in handling classified material but "no reasonable prosecutor" could have brought a case against her. At a congressional hearing last May, he said he was concerned that the Justice Department itself could not "credibly" announce the conclusion of its investigation, in part because then-attorney general, Loretta Lynch, had met aboard her plane with former President Bill Clinton.

Also criticized was Comey's decision, against the recommendation of the Justice Department, to reveal to Congress that the FBI was reopening the investigation following the discovery of new emails.

The FBI obtained a warrant nine days before the presidential election to review those emails, found on the laptop of former Rep. Anthony Weiner, and ultimately determined that there was nothing in them that changed its original conclusion.

The inspector general also faulted the FBI for failing to act with more urgency in reviewing emails from Weiner's laptop.



Then-FBI Director James Comey testifies Jan. 10, 2017, on Capitol Hill in Washington.

[CLIFF OWEN/ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE]



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