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Wounded Warrior CEO expects layoffs at charity



The Wounded Warrior Project's new CEO told the Washington Post that layoffs are likely part of the restructuring of the nonprofit's organization, which is headquartered off Belfort Road in Jacksonville.

New chief executive says financing for smaller veterans groups also on the table as part of Jacksonville-based group's restructuring

By Dan Lamothe
The Washington Post

The new chief executive of the Wounded Warrior Project, one of the nation's largest veterans charities, said he anticipates laying off an undisclosed number of employees and cutting the amount of financing it provides smaller veterans groups amid a restructuring that follows scrutiny of the nonprofit organization's spending.

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Linnington, who took over Wounded Warrior Project in July, said he is in the middle of an assessment that includes meeting with wounded warriors, donors and officials from other groups that help veterans. Details of the restructuring will be announced in September, but employees already know that some jobs will be cut and the salaries of some senior officials will be reduced, he said. There are currently about 600 employees, with headquarters in Jacksonville and offices in other cities.



Linnington

"We have a long road ahead of us, and the mission is huge, and it's going to continue to grow," Linnington said. "We have to be as nimble and as transparent and as responsive as we can possibly be."

Linnington, a 35-year Army veteran who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was hired in June following a nationwide search. He replaces former chief executive Steven Nardizzi and chief operating officer Al Giordano, who were let go by the organization in March under a cloud after investigative reports by both the New York Times and CBS News raised questions about their spending.

Former Wounded Warrior Project employees raised questions in those reports about five-star hotel accommodations the nonprofit organization used and how much money it spent to expand its own clout. Wounded Warrior Project officials protested the depiction at the time, but Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, the chairman of

WOUNDED continues on A-5

The Pension Storm

A Times-Union Special Series

Curry pitch: Few details, little fuss

While his campaigning is bipartisan, mayor's talking points rankle some

By Nate Monroe
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Mayor Lenny Curry doesn't go out much in public anymore without plugging his pension-tax plan. Not even a Donald Trump rally will stop him.

He doesn't put on a Ross Perot-style show with graphs and pie charts. There is no PowerPoint presentation. It's more like a detailed stump speech that Curry can recite with remarkable consistency.

He doesn't shy away from taking questions, though he rarely moves off familiar talking points.

Here is what Curry will not say, in public or private: If his plan frees up money, what will he spend it on?

That is a major contrast from the last time a Jacksonville mayor asked voters to approve a sales tax. Former Mayor John Delaney laid out in exhaustive detail what each constituency group across this sprawling city could expect under his Better Jacksonville Plan, which voters ultimately approved in 2000.

Not so, this time. It's all stick and no carrot. Curry instead talks about his plan as "tough medicine," or that it addresses an elusive problem "once and for all."

This approach has rankled some residents, some of whom have shown up for months at City Council meetings to voice their displeasure and suspicion that their neighborhoods would be excluded from any windfall of cash.

PENSION continues on A-4

About this series

The Times-Union is taking an in-depth look at the proposed half-cent sales tax for pension costs

Saturday: How did Jacksonville get to this point?

Today: Will Mayor Curry's plan fix the problem?

Monday: How is Curry campaigning for the tax?

Tuesday: What happens to employees' benefits?

Wednesday: What if the sales tax referendum fails?

Read the series at jacksonville.com/pensionseries

Literacy gap still problem in Duval

Black, Hispanic students trailing behind whites, Asians, latest data shows

By Denise Smith Amos
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Duval's School Board split down the middle on a vote Tuesday night, barely approving Superintendent Nikolai Vitti's newest literacy plan.

One of three board members voting against it, Constance Hall, said she couldn't approve it because she was "heartbroken" and losing sleep over a lack of progress in closing achievement gaps. She said black and Hispanic students remain far behind their white and Asian peers, especially in reading.

"We're in the emergency room and we need help,"

Duval's achievement gaps

The percentages of students who passed the state's annual assessments last spring show African-American and Hispanic students trailing white and Asian American students. Note that state exams for reading are for grades 3-10, math is for grades 3-8, and algebra, biology and US history for whatever grade those courses are taken in, usually in high-school or eighth grade.

	READING	MATH	ALGEBRA 1	BIOLOGY	US HISTORY
African American	31%	38%	31%	59%	47%
White	62%	66%	64%	82%	78%
Asian	68%	74%	77%	88%	77%
Hispanic	43%	48%	40%	71%	59%

Source: Duval County Schools

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she said.

Rebecca Couch, another board member, said that's one reason the School Board is conducting an outsider audit of reading courses and the way teachers use it.

"We have an achievement gap issue that could widen," Couch said. "We're having improvements with

certain student subgroups, but you have children who are being left behind."

According to just released data, only 31 percent of Duval's African-American students passed Florida's annual reading assessments in grades 3 through 10, while Hispanics did slightly better, with 41 passing.

That is worse than the 62 percent passing rate for white students and 68 percent passing among Asian-American students in Duval.

Similarly, African-American and Hispanic students under-performed white and Asian-American stu-

READING continues on A-4

Lottery sales push hits state's poorest areas

Sales of scratch-off games in high-poverty neighborhoods surge

By Dan Sweeney
Sun Sentinel

The Florida Lottery's aggressive campaign to sell more scratch-off tickets has enticed the state's poorest residents the most.

In the areas of highest poverty — where people are most attracted to scratch-off games — 1 in 6 households spent at least \$10 of every \$1,000 in income on the games in 2010. Last year, that ratio grew to 1 in 3.

Although scratch-off

sales have surged statewide, a Sun Sentinel analysis found:

■ Sales of scratch-offs in high-poverty areas rose almost three times as fast as other areas.

■ Sales in impoverished neighborhoods swelled as the lottery increased its advertising to minorities.

■ Brisk scratch-off sales did not dramatically increase the amount of money raised for education, which the lottery touts as one of its chief benefits.

Critics have long characterized the lottery as a regressive tax, taking more money from the

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READING

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dents by wide margins in math and other subjects.

Students with disabilities scored below the African-American and Hispanic groups of students. (Students with disabilities are counted twice, by ethnicity and by disability status.)

Duval has undergone several years of reforms, including introducing new programs and classroom materials, stepping up teacher and principal training, and other major efforts. Despite that, Hall said, she worries disparities are getting worse.

Vitti agrees that achievement gaps persist, but he sees progress in the latest batch of data for most student subgroups.

He said in many exam subjects and grade levels, blacks and Hispanics increased passing rates over prior years.

For instance, African Americans boosted passing rates in math from grades 3 through 8 by at least 2 percentage points in each grade, he said. The exceptions were algebra 1 and 2, and geometry, where blacks' passing rates fell by at least a percentage point.

For reading, blacks' passing rates increased by at least 3 percentage points

each in grades 3, 6 and 8, though passing rates fell in fourth, fifth and seventh grades.

Vitti said the district instilled new curriculum and "ways of work" for kindergarten through fifth grades, and increased specially trained teachers who work with small groups of students on reading. "We're seeing scattered improvement in literacy," he said.

He said the best indicators of whether the district is headed in the right direction are third graders, because they were kindergartners when the reforms began. All four subgroups improved in third grade.

"I have a great deal of urgency for closing the achievement gap," Vitti said. "If you look at our body of work in the last couple of years, it has been an equity-driven agenda."

But it takes more than two or three years to close achievement gaps, he added.

Vitti's new literacy plan includes new supplemental text books emphasizing in phonics for kindergarten through second grades. The district also is converting three elementary schools into "early learning centers" for that age group.

This year the district is changing language arts materials in middle schools and next year it will in high schools.

John Turner, a school board candidate,

said Duval caused its literacy problems by de-emphasizing "phonics" in reading instruction over the years.

Vitti said the state's more rigorous standards require a balance between phonics — learning to read by learning the sounds of words — with other functions in literacy, such as listening, comprehending and analyzing reading passages.

"If the curriculum just focuses on letters and sounds, then kids don't become thinkers," he said.

Hall said that teachers need more in-depth training on techniques for accelerating young, struggling readers. She said the literacy plan doesn't include much of that.

Susan M. Syverud, a University of North Florida associate professor of education, agrees that phonics need an emphasis, but she also agreed with Hall that teachers and principals need more training in assessing reading skills and developing thoughtful instruction plans, she said.

Did Duval's mixed reading scores have more to do with writing than with reading?

Mason Davis, the district's assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, said Florida's reading exams have significant writing components, including essays, for most grade levels.

The state will not say how much weight

those writing scores have on students' overall reading scores, he said, but it plays a significant part in whether a student passes. In prior years, Florida separated writing exams from its reading tests.

Vitti said that beginning this year all school grades will intensify writing instruction and practice.

Meanwhile, reading scores and disparities could affect graduation rates, something Vitti has been proud of. Duval is the top large district in Florida in African-American graduation rates.

But the latest state testing data show that African-American and Hispanic students scored far below white and Asian students in 10th grade reading last spring; 28 percent of African-American students and 41 percent of Hispanic students passed, compared to 60 percent of white students and 65 percent of Asian-American students.

Students need to pass 10th grade reading to qualify for a diploma their senior year.

Hall, Couch and Board member Paula Wright voted no on Vitti's literacy plan while Cheryl Grymes, Scott Shine, and Board Chairwoman Ashley Smith Juarez voted for it, with Smith Juarez' casting the deciding vote.

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PENSION

Continued from A-1

And yet, Curry has been able to line up most of the city's business and civic establishment behind his plan. The politically potent police and firefighter unions back it. Prominent Republicans and Democrats support it. All 19 members of the council co-sponsored the legislation putting the plan on the Aug. 30 ballot.

"Inclusivity and a broad base of support is what the mayor wants, and it's what I think this initiative deserves," said Susie Wiles, a consultant who co-chairs Yes for Jacksonville, the political action committee backing Curry's plan.

Curry chairs Yes for Jacksonville, giving him a political vehicle to sell his plan in addition to the bully pulpit of the mayor's office.

"The big advantage is there hasn't been any funded opposition," said Matthew Corrigan, a University of North Florida political science professor.

That means Curry has been free to largely define the debate around his plan.

He wants to enact a half-cent sales tax that would begin after the Better Jacksonville sales tax expires in 2030. The new tax, by state law, can only be dedicated to paying off the city's \$2.85 billion pension debt. Curry has insisted that this arrangement means his plan amounts to a tax "extension," rather than a new tax, because residents would see no change in what they pay now.

The distinction has rarely been challenged in public forums.

Another component Curry has often emphasized is that the city would also be required to close at least one of its three pension plans — police and fire, general employees and corrections — if it wants to use the sales tax.

Curry says he wants to close all three during collective bargaining talks after the Aug. 30 vote, and he has expressed confidence he can get that done. The public-safety unions, whose retirement costs make up the bulk of the city's pension debt, have echoed that belief.

"There has been almost eight years now of pure craziness, and it would be a relief for our members to stop this from being in the headlines," said Randy Wyse, president of the Jacksonville Association of Fire Fighters.

A BALANCING ACT

Curry's approach to the Aug. 30 referendum is in some respects a departure from his campaign for mayor last year, in which



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Jacksonville Mayor Lenny Curry has been pitching his pension plan at any and all of his scheduled public outings. In May, he visited the First Coast News program "The Chat" to help sell the extension of a ½ cent sales tax to fund the city's pension program.

he defeated an incumbent Democrat in a highly partisan race. In particular, Curry's push to court Democrats — his chief administrative officer made a pitch to the Jacksonville Young Democrats last week — and other groups not typically in his political orbit, like Northside pastors, is a notable shift for a man who once chaired the Republican Party of Florida.

But partisanship has been hard to escape in this presidential election year, and Curry has found himself trying to balance his political role with his governing one. For example, outside Trump's downtown rally last week — for which Curry served as master of ceremonies — some protesters began chanting, "No justice, no pension."

"Showing up at the Trump rally ... that casts you in a pretty partisan light," said Michael Binder, a UNF political science professor who runs the school's Public Opinion Research Laboratory. "He needs to be careful with that because he's going to alienate voters. He's going to need Democrats in order

for this to be able to pass."

SOME SIMILARITIES

Despite Curry's bipartisan approach to the referendum, the campaign carries some characteristic similarities to the way he captured City Hall in last year's mayoral campaign.

For one thing, he is a prolific fundraiser and has used his connections to keep Yes for Jacksonville flush with cash.

The political action committee has been airing TV ads and sending out mail pieces, though its web presence appears to be somewhat limited. But there is evidence the group plans a final blitz in the final weeks of the campaign.

The group has so far taken in more than \$1.3 million in donations but has only spent about \$538,000, according to finance reports through June 22.

Yes for Jacksonville is also being run by two political consultants who ran Curry's mayoral campaign and remain among his closest confidants: Brian Hughes, from Tallahassee, and Jacksonville-based Tim Baker.

BIGGEST PENSION SUPPORTERS

Several large Jacksonville businesses, families and advocacy groups have dug deep in their pockets on behalf of Yes for Jacksonville. Here is a rundown of some major contributors:

- The Petway family and businesses: \$150,000
- Shad Khan and the Jaguars: \$150,000
- Fidelity Information Services: \$150,000
- CSX and CEO Michael Ward: \$75,000
- The PGA of America: \$50,000
- Peter Rummell: \$50,000
- The Weaver family: \$50,000
- Jacksonville Kennel Club: \$50,000

GROUPS AND OFFICIALS SUPPORTING THE PENSION TAX

- Sheriff Mike Williams
- The Fraternal Order of Police
- The Jacksonville Association of Fire fighters
- Northeast Florida Builders Association
- JAX Chamber
- Duval Republican Executive Committee
- Associated Builders and Contractors
- JAX SPORTS Council
- Future Leaders of Jacksonville
- Jacksonville Civic Council
- JEA
- International Longshoremen Association

PASTORS WHO SUPPORT THE PENSION PLAN

- Bishop Rudolph McKissick, Bethel Baptist
- John Guns, St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church
- John Newman, The Sanctuary at Mt Calvary
- Tom Messer, Trinity Baptist Church
- Gary Williams, First Baptist of Mandarin
- Fred Newbill, First Timothy Baptist Church
- Mark Griffin, Wayman Ministries
- Leofric Thomas, Open Arms Christian Fellowship

tion — and that critics can nitpick it. But he never wavers: This is the city's best option going forward.

John Winkler, who is president of the Concerned Taxpayers of Duval County, has emerged as one of the most vocal critics of Curry's plan.

Winkler's started a Just Vote No political committee, but it has only raised \$806, according to the latest finance report, an amount dwarfed by the donations to Curry's well-funded operation.

Among Winkler's major criticisms is that part of Curry's plan involves deferring the bulk of the city's pension-debt payments.

The tax, which would begin in 2031, does not by itself offer the city any financial relief. Deferring much of the debt payments until later years when the tax begins, however, could offer the city financial relief ranging from \$40 million to \$68 million per year.

But that comes with a cost. Deferring payments would add about \$1.5 billion more in pension payments through 2049.

"Few in this community would disagree that the (pension debt) is an issue demanding attention," Winkler wrote to Curry. "Unfortunately, you have chosen to champion a future sales tax, potentially imposed from 2031 to 2060, as the 'only option' as well as the 'solution' to the

(debt) problem 'once and for all.'"

Winkler challenged Curry to a debate scheduled Tuesday.

"We have not engaged in any debates about pension reform. Mayor Curry has developed a comprehensive solution that provides a dedicated revenue source to address and resolve the city's pension debt," said mayoral spokeswoman Marsha Oliver in a written statement. "I will be sure to share Mr. Winkler's request for the mayor with our scheduling team for review and determination. It is our standard process and practice for all event requests."

CURRY: NO OTHER OPTION

What happens if Curry's pension plan doesn't pass?

When asked, he usually has two answers:

"It will pass."

And: "There is no other option."

Curry has staked much of his first term on a referendum issue that is complicated and asks voters to pay for something that they can't see or use. The outcome of the Aug. 30 vote will loom large over his remaining time in office.

"This is a complicated policy problem that you're taking to the people in the form of direct democracy," Corrigan said. "There are a lot of challenges with that."

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WHEN AND WHERE TO VOTE

Duval County voters will decide this month on a proposed half-cent sales tax to pay down the city's \$2.85 billion pension debt.

What does the ballot measure say:

"Permanently closing up to three of the city's underfunded defined benefit retirement plans, increasing the employee contribution for those plans to a minimum of 10 percent, and ending the Better Jacksonville half-cent sales tax are all required to adopt a half-cent sales tax solely dedicated to reducing the city's unfunded pension liability. Shall such pension liability sales tax, which ends upon elimination of the unfunded pension liability or in 30 years maximum, be adopted?"

Who can vote on the referendum:

All Duval County registered voters, regardless of party affiliation

When can they vote:

Early voting runs from Aug. 15-28. Election Day is Aug. 30.

What are the early voting sites:

- Argyle Branch Library, 7973 Old Middleburg Road
- Beaches Branch Library, 600 Third Street, Neptune Beach
- Bradham & Brooks Branch Library, 1755 Edgewood Ave. W.
- Gateway Town Center, 910 44th St. W.
- Highlands Regional Library, 1826 Dunn Ave.
- Legends Community Center, 5130 Soutel Drive
- Mandarin Branch Library, 3330 Kori Road
- Murray Hill Branch Library, 918 Edgewood Ave. S.
- Oceanway Community Center, 12215 Sago Ave. W.
- Pablo Creek Regional Library, 13295 Beach Blvd.

- Regency Square Branch Library, 9900 Regency Square Blvd.
- San Marco Branch Library, 1513 LaSalle St.
- Supervisor of Elections main office, 105 E. Monroe St.
- South Mandarin Branch Library, 12125 San Jose Blvd.
- Southeast Regional Library, 10599 Deerwood Park Blvd.
- University Park Branch Library, 3435 University Blvd. N.
- Webb-Wesconnett Regional Library, 6887 103rd St.
- West Branch Library, 1425 Chaffee Road S.

Sources: Duval County Supervisor of Elections, city of Jacksonville