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Democrats rip pension tax

Gibson calls sales tax 'fatally flawed,' but Hazouri says it's necessary

By David Bauerlein
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A vacant, slab-covered lot along Norwood Avenue became the stage for high-stakes political drama Tuesday when state Sen. Audrey Gibson joined the Duval County Democratic Party in urging voters to reject a half-cent sales tax that would start in 2031 for paying down the city's massive pension debt.

"We see this as fatally flawed public policy," said Duval County Democratic Party Chairman Neil Henrichsen. "It is a charade to

MORE INSIDE

Columnist Ron Littlepage gets off the fence in the pension tax debate. **A-5**

think that a tax 14 years into the future — taxing our children, taxing our grandchildren, taxing people who will have no voice on this issue — is good public policy."

The news conference came on the heels of the county party's executive committee approving a resolution Monday against the

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Former state senator Tony Hill (from left), State Sen. Audrey Gibson and Duval Democratic Party Chair Neil Henrichsen gathered with a group of Democrats in an empty lot on Norwood Avenue to oppose Mayor Lenny Curry's half-cent sales tax.

★ ★ ★ Election 2016 ★ ★ ★

State attorney candidates mix it up at JU debate

Nassau mourns baseball coach

Killed in tree-trimming accident; leaves 2 sons, wife expecting twins

By Joe Daraskevich
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A procession of youth baseball players will file out of the First Baptist Church in Fernandina Beach on Saturday behind the casket of a man who taught them countless lessons on the baseball diamond.

The honorary pallbearers will be wearing their Yulee Rays jerseys or T-shirts in a tribute to their coach, Christopher "Adam" Nichols.

Nichols, 33, died Saturday when a tree he was

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Christopher "Adam" Nichols holds his son, Brock, along with his wife Leah and his older son Brodie. Nichols died Saturday in a tree-trimming accident in Nassau County. His wife is pregnant with twins.



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At the 4th Judicial Circuit State Attorney Republican candidate debate Tuesday night at Jacksonville University's Swisher Theater, Melissa Nelson (center) makes her opening statement while incumbent Angela Corey and Wes White listen.

Melissa Nelson is criticized over handling of Monster of Mayport murder case

By Larry Hannan
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Two weeks before voters go to the polls to decide on the top prosecutor in the Jacksonville area, the three candidates seeking the position all argued they were the best candidate for the job at a contentious Tuesday night debate at Jacksonville University.

Incumbent State Attorney Angela Corey touted her experience and said she'd made the area safer over the past eight years. But challengers Melissa Nelson and Wesley White said Corey was ineffective and the community deserved a better elected prosecutor.

But Nelson, leading in the polls, was

hit several times by both Corey and White for dropping the death penalty against William E. Wells, nicknamed the Monster of Mayport.

Wells pleaded guilty in 2004 to murdering his wife, her father and brother and two other people at his home in Mayport. After his wife was killed, the others were slain as they came to the mobile home. Wells stayed there with his then-4-year-old son for as long as a week, even duct-taping doors closed in the residence where decaying bodies were found in four bedrooms, The Times-Union reported at the time.

But Nelson defended her decision,

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DAILY DEAL!

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FOOTBALL NIGHT
IN JACKSONVILLE

AUG 20 | 7:00 PM
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NICHOLS

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cutting down fell on top of him as he was clearing a customer's property after an Aug. 4 tornado passed through Nassau County, said Nichols' brother-in-law Nate Burns.

Burns said Nichols owned his own landscaping and tree trimming business, and he usually worked six days a week to accommodate his customers.

When he wasn't working, he was coaching a Yulee Little League youth baseball team.

Among the baseball players in attendance Saturday will be Nichols' two sons — Brodie, 9, and Brock, 6 — and his wife, Leah. The family of four lost their father and husband Saturday, but it is expected to grow by two more in the coming months.

Leah Nichols is pregnant with twins, and now the community in Nassau County is coming together to help support the growing family.

"I can't tell you the number of people's lives that he's touched," Drew Scott said of Nichols.

Scott owns Scott and Sons Fine Jewelry, 9900 Amelia Island Parkway. He said Nichols has been his



Christopher "Adam" Nichols holds a cake with his Yulee Rays baseball team in an undated photo.

landscaper since the store opened seven years ago, and he was a friend before that.

Scott said his store is accepting monetary donations instead of payments for watch batteries or band adjustments with all the proceeds going to Leah Nichols and her family.

"Whether they do it at my store or in any other way, I just want the family to get the help they need," Scott said.

A funding page created for the Nichols family was shared over 2,000 times on social media as of Tuesday afternoon with over \$20,000 raised.

People can donate to the family at www.youaring.com/leah-nichols-and-kids-623994.

Burns said his brother-in-law was one of the friendliest men he knew.

"He was the guy that wherever he was he would take a moment to talk to anybody he saw," Burns said.

Nichols was an avid fan of University of Alabama football, and he even met former Yulee High and Crimson Tide running back Derrick Henry, Burns said.

"He had Derrick sign jerseys for both his sons, and I know that meant a lot to him," Burns said.

The two sons are now without their father and the only baseball coach they've ever known.

A visitation at the First Baptist Church at 1600 S. Eighth Street is scheduled Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m., followed by funeral services.

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TAX

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proposed sales tax, which is strongly backed by Mayor Lenny Curry.

The Democratic Party's resolution says the proposal to shift a big chunk of the pension costs into the future would increase the city's long-term pension costs by \$1.5 billion, a tab that would be "paid in part by future generations."

Gibson, D-Jacksonville, voted for the state legislation that gave Jacksonville the ability to have the referendum on the half-cent sales tax.

Now that the choice is before voters, she said they should vote against it. She objected to the Yes for Jacksonville committee putting her name on a mailer showing her as an endorser of the sales tax, calling it a "sham flyer."

"I have a right to my voice and I've decided my voice will say 'no' because I believe when in doubt, don't," she said.

Minutes after the Democratic Party wrapped up its news conference, City Councilman Tommy Hazouri, a Democrat who has cut television ads in favor of the sales tax, arrived at the corner lot, located a few blocks from Gateway Town Center, and quickly unloaded his rebuttal.

He branded the opposition a "big mistake on the



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Flanked by former state senator Tony Hill (left) and State Sen. Audrey Gibson, Duval Democratic Party Chair Neil Henrichsen comes out against the mayor's sales tax.

part of the Democratic Party."

"I'm here because I represent all of Jacksonville," Hazouri said. "I think it's a big mistake to go against the sales tax. I think it's going to pass, and I think those who are opposed to it are selfish about the future of the city, and I think they're wrong in the decision they made today. And I will stand by Lenny Curry or anyone else — independent, Republican or Democrat — who supports this issue. It's about what's good for Jacksonville."

As Hazouri spoke, opponents of the sales tax held up "Vote No" signs behind

him. Former state representative Andy Johnson repeatedly asked Hazouri if opponents of the sales tax could interrupt supporters at their events. Hazouri said the news conference by the Democratic Party had already ended when he showed up.

"I'm not going to get into this with big-mouth over there," Hazouri said of Johnson. "Andy and I go back a long way. He's against everything we do in Jacksonville."

The face-off occurred on the second day of early voting for the Aug. 30 election. If approved by voters, the half-cent sales tax would

start after the existing half-cent sales tax for the Better Jacksonville Plan expires in 2030. The proposed sales tax would provide a dedicated funding source for paying down the city's \$2.85 billion pension debt for its three pension plans.

MAYOR NEEDS DEMOCRATS

University of North Florida political science professor Michael Binder said the opposition by Democratic leaders could have some influence on voters.

"Curry is going to need Democratic votes," Binder said. "There's no two ways about that. He's not going

to get 100 percent of the Republicans on board with this. He's going to need Democratic votes to get over 50 percent, and that (opposition) does nothing but hurt his cause."

Supporters of the sales tax have portrayed it as a bipartisan movement, pointing to the unanimous backing of all 19 City Council members, Republicans and Democrats alike.

The state legislation that allowed Jacksonville to call the referendum also secured bipartisan support in Tallahassee when it won passage in the spring session.

Gibson and State Rep. Mia Jones, D-Jacksonville, said they supported giving voters a the final say on taxing themselves, but that doesn't mean they support the tax.

When the House voted on the legislation allowing the sales tax referendum in March, Jones urged lawmakers to support the bill because Jacksonville "as a community would come together and say, 'We will be responsible for those decisions that were made and we will move forward.'"

In a Facebook post Tuesday, Jones said the Yes for Jacksonville campaign incorrectly put her down as an "endorser" of the sales tax when it sent out the mailer.

"Time is out for smoke and mirrors," Jones wrote. "If you have to go as far

as to use someone's name without permission, I have to question the transparency of this amendment."

QUESTIONS OF FAIRNESS

Gibson and former state senator Tony Hill, who represented the district before she was elected, said the sales tax hits people with low incomes the hardest.

"We feel that it's not fair," Hill said. "We feel that the dialogue has not been fair."

"There should have been no rush to put it on the ballot in August so it could be totally fleshed out in the community, which I don't think has really happened," Gibson said.

The city has not presented a specific list of projects that would be paid for by any budget relief from passing the half-cent sales tax. But Hazouri said Curry's budgets have shown attention to investing in all areas of the city, with a large share of construction spending going to northwest Jacksonville.

He said the legislation enabling Jacksonville to call the referendum got through the state legislature with unanimous support of the Duval County delegation. "They should be for it today," Hazouri said of the sales tax. "For those who have changed their minds, they have a right to do it, but I say shame on them."

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DEBATE

Continued from A-1

pointing out that she was responsible for putting Wells in prison for life.

"William Wells will never walk this earth amongst you all ever again," Nelson said, while also adding that the victim's families in that case asked for a life sentence instead of death.

Nelson said Corey was her supervisor at the time that plea deal was reached, and Corey praised her handling of that case in a written review. Corey denied that and said she opposed the deal.

Corey said Wells vowed to kill again and Nelson and former State Attorney Harry Shorstein were wrong to agree to a plea deal.

"When someone says they will kill again you have to do everything you can to isolate them so they won't kill again," Corey said.

White also criticized Nelson for dropping the death penalty, saying some crimes justified death.

Corey said her experience made her the best candidate. She also touted her endorsements from law enforcement and other elected public officials as well as her high death penalty rate.

The homicide rate has dropped while she has been the chief prosecutor, Corey said.

"Our record speaks for itself," Corey said, while later saying "I've tried more cases than these two

have ever tried."

She's tried over 60 homicide cases and supervised hundreds more, Corey said.

"The state attorney can't prevent murder, but we can certainly make sure they don't get out early," Corey said, citing her willingness to seek the death penalty and maximum sentences.

But Nelson said Jacksonville led the state in murders and said her parents didn't want to move to Jacksonville because of the crime rate.

Nelson had sharp criticism for Corey, who she said is "seeking a third term to retain power. Power she has abused at your tax dollars."

Nelson and White also criticized Corey for closing the state attorney race to non-Republicans. Corey's former campaign manager filed the papers for write-in candidate Kenny Leigh, closing the primary. But Corey said she knew nothing about it until after it happened.

Nelson said Corey has never admitted to being behind this, and it demonstrated how Corey wasn't trustworthy. Corey said Nelson wanted liberals to vote in this election.

Nelson said she's never complained about running in a Republican primary because she's a lifelong Republican and reiterated that voters should be concerned that the chief law enforcement officer in the area pulled a "cheap political trick."

White said it was a cheap

political trick, but it happens all the time.

Corey defended her decision to prosecute juveniles as adults. Nelson, who defended 12-year-old Cristian Fernandez, said Corey has no interest in doing right by her underage client and she would do a better job of seeking justice for underage criminals.

Nelson also said that almost 60 prosecutors who once worked for or with Corey had endorsed her.

Corey also defended her decision to try George Zimmerman for second-degree murder, saying the evidence justified it even though Zimmerman was acquitted. She said the case was only controversial because the media blew it out of proportion.

Nelson criticized Corey for her behavior in the Zimmerman case, saying Corey played politics with the case.

White also refused to apologize to Nelson for accusing her of committing a crime by trying to force him out of the race. A special prosecutor said Nelson did nothing illegal, but White said Nelson was still playing dirty politics.

Nelson said White owed her an apology and said White wasted law enforcement resources by bringing these allegations. Nelson also accused Corey of working with White to gang up on her in negative ads that both knew were untrue when it came to these allegations.

After the debate Nelson said it was obvious that Co-

Magazine queries if Corey is Florida's 'cruellest prosecutor'

By Larry Hannan
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Angela Corey's campaign for reelection received a jolt Tuesday when a national magazine published an article criticizing her tenure as 4th Judicial Circuit State Attorney.

The article in *The Nation* — headlined "Is Angela Corey the Cruellest Prosecutor in America?" — focused on her decision to try 12-year-old Cristian Fernandez as an adult for the murder of his half-brother.

The article criticized Corey for often trying juveniles in adult court. It also looked at Corey's decision to unsuccessfully prosecute George Zimmerman for second-degree murder in the death of Trayvon Martin and to prosecute and seek a 60-year prison sentence for Marissa Alexander after she fired a shot in the direction of her abusive husband and his two underage children after he'd beaten her.

"But these high-profile cases only hint at the governing ethos in Corey's office," the article said. "In nearly every relevant category, Duval County

(by far the largest in the Fourth Circuit) embodies the outdated ideas that have fueled mass incarceration in this country — theories that everyone from the Obama administration to the Koch brothers have declared useless. In 2010, Duval had the highest incarceration rate in Florida — significantly higher than every jurisdiction of comparable size or larger, even though crime everywhere in the state was at a historic low."

The *Nation* article, written by Jessica Pishko, was also critical of 4th Judicial Circuit Public Defender Matt Shirk and his chief deputy, Refik Eler, arguing that they were ineffective in defending Fernandez and rehashing a past scandal involving Shirk.

A grand jury recommended Shirk be removed from office for his inappropriate relationships with women and how he handled Fernandez's murder case. Shirk and Corey are running for re-election and will be on the Aug. 30 ballot.

The story can be read at <http://bit.ly/2aYjuVi>.

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rey and White were gang-ing up on her because she was winning in the polls. White said he didn't want Nelson or Corey elected, and said he was attacking Nelson more because she was ahead.

The mixed crowd got heated at times, with supporters of all three candidates cheering and, at

times, booing. During a commercial break, one person yelled "Melissa stinks," drawing boos from the Nelson supporters in the crowd.

The debate was hosted by the Jacksonville University Public Policy Institute and WJXT TV-4.

Early voting has already begun. Election day is Aug.

30. Only registered Republicans can vote in the state attorney primary.

The winner of the primary will face Leigh, the write-in candidate, in November.

Staff writer Andrew Pantazi contributed to this story.

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