

metro

FLYING INTO BRUNSWICK

Blue Angels back in Glynn County for first time in 20 years for Golden Isles Air Show this weekend **Story, B-3**



Unions finalize support for pension reform push

By David Bauerlein
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The final pieces are falling in place for Mayor Lenny Curry to sign, seal and deliver to the City Council a raft of proposed labor agreements that would close the city's pension plans to future hires.

The last two unions still at the bargaining table struck tentative agreements Monday and Tuesday.

Closing the pension

plans to future city employees is a key component of Curry's pension-reform plan because state law requires that step before the city can take advantage of a half-cent sales tax approved by voters in August for paying down the city's massive \$2.85 billion pension debt.

The City Council has the final say over the collective bargaining agreements. Curry has not said when he will file pension reform legislation with the council, but representa-

tives of the mayor's office have indicated he wants to have information ready by the end of the month so the council can start deliberating in April.

Getting through the collective bargaining talks has been complicated because employees covered by the three pension plans — police and firefighters, general employees, and corrections officers — are represented by nine different unions. Some unions have separate units for city and JEA employees, result-

ing in the city's own version of March Madness as talks came to a head in a series of votes.

On Tuesday, JEA reached tentative agreement with the Laborers' International Union of North America, coming on the heels of the utility reaching an agreement Monday with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

If rank-and-file members of both unions support the tentative agreements in votes scheduled Thursday and Friday, that would

complete the collective bargaining phase of pension reform. Union leaders are throwing their support behind the tentative agree-

ments. "We will endorse it," LIUNA local business manager Ronnie Burris told JEA negotiators at the bargaining table. "We will get the word out."

LIUNA members last week rejected a JEA offer that provided pay raises of 3 percent annually for three years. The tentative agreement struck Tuesday

has a 4.5 percent pay raise the first year, a 5 percent raise the second year, and a 4.5 percent raise the third year.

The half-cent sales tax for pension costs won't start until around 2031 after the existing Better Jacksonville Plan expires, but state law gives the city ways to reduce pension contributions until the sales tax starts, provided the city closes its pension plans to new hires.

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mark woods

Spring break trip provides glimpse of Tebow's try

Mia and I made our annual spring break trip to Lakeland. We camped at Blue Spring State Park, checked out the manatees and saw why the swimming area was closed (a small gator) before heading to Lakeland to see the Detroit Tigers playing a spring training game.

In spring training, you're never really sure who will be on the field for any given game. So our routine involves buying a scorecard, getting one of those stubby pencils and heading to a spot in the concourse where the lineups are posted on the wall.

People were using their phones to snap photos of the lineups for the Tigers and New York Mets. And while some were commenting on which starters were or weren't playing, the biggest reaction involved the seventh batter in the visiting team's lineup — a 29-year-old left-fielder from Northeast Florida whose name you may recognize.

Tebow LF
Yes, I went to a Grapefruit League game and ended up watching perhaps the closing argument in one of the hotly debated questions of this spring training: Does Tim Tebow belong there?

When the starting lineups of both teams were introduced, Tebow got more applause than any of the Tigers. Some of that was because the biggest of names on the Tigers roster weren't playing. But some of that was simply because he's Tim Tebow, the former Heisman Trophy winner who still inspires remarkable levels of adoration — and because of that adoration, remarkable levels of disdain — wherever he goes.

When he came to bat, fans all over Joker Marchant Stadium held up their phones and documented what happened. Which wasn't much.

He went 0-for-3, dropping his spring average to .200. But he did hit the ball hard, so hard that in one at-bat he was barely out of the batter's box when the line drive already was in the glove of the third baseman.

All in all, he looked better as a hitter than I expected (better, for instance, than highly touted Tigers prospect Stephen Moya, a 6-foot-6 outfielder who looks like he could play football but isn't ready to be a major-league player yet).

In the field, it was a se-

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Researchers Michelina Dziadzio (from left), Alex Kalfin and Eric Seckinger, members of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission team, use a burrow scope to see whether a gopher tortoise is home. (Photos by Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

Northeast Florida gopher tortoise count underway

By Teresa Stepzinski
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A bald eagle sailed above the pines with no more than a passing glance down Tuesday morning as Michelina Dziadzio and colleagues Alex Kalfin and Eric Seckinger hiked through thick, knee-high grass that threatened to ensnare their feet as they dodged palmettos.

Heads down with their eyes scanning the ground, the three were census-takers of a sort. Instead of knocking on doors and asking personal questions, they ran a scope with a video camera attached to the end of a snake-like 15-foot cable down a hole in hope of glimpsing the resident gopher tortoise home at the Branan Field Wildlife and Environmental Area near the Duval-Clay County line.

The day got off to a successful start as Dziadzio, Kalfin and Seckinger — members of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission research team — located five gopher tortoises inside six burrows 20 minutes into their search of the 386-acre state preserve. Based on size, those tortoises ranged from young adults about 9 years old to older adults, said Dziadzio, gopher tortoise mapping and monitoring coordinator.

Although generally congenial to ani-



A video image of a gopher tortoise in its burrow is displayed on a monitor from a scope lowered into the hole.

mal and insect visitors, the tortoises turned tail to the scientist's scope and retreated as far back in their burrow as they could while the cable inched closer. The result was a pretty clear view of tortoise rumps or flanks transmitted back to a video monitor on the surface in the minute or so it took the scientists to document the animals and burrow's GPS coordinates.

"I did have one chase the camera out once. ... She apparently did not want that scope in her burrow," Dziadzio said of a

TORTOISES continues on B-4

HOW TO HELP GOPHER TORTOISES

- Information about gopher tortoises and how to help the threatened species is available from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Gopher Tortoise Council. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission — myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/gopher-tortoise
- Download free FWC gopher tortoise app to either Android and iOS smartphones — myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/gopher-tortoise/app
- Gopher Tortoise Council — www.gophertortoise.org or www.facebook.com/Gopher-Tortoise-Council-138521712832770
- A Guide to Living with Gopher Tortoises — myfwc.com/media/1329739/GopherTortoise_LivingWithBrochure.pdf
- Report an injured or dead gopher tortoise by calling (850) 921-1030 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays. On weekends and after hours daily, call the Fish and Wildlife Commission's toll-free Wildlife Alert hotline at (888) 404-3922, or use #FWC or *FWC on your cellphone. People also can text Tip@MyFWC.com. If you cannot remain at the site, give a detailed location. In addition, people also can report the information online at public.myfwc.com/HSC/GopherTortoise/GT-Mortality.aspx. The information could help save the tortoise.

Movement to allow liquor sales in grocery stores gains traction

By Tia Mitchell
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TALLAHASSEE | A Prohibition-era restriction on selling liquor in Florida's grocery and convenience stores could be headed toward last call.

Senate Bill 106, known informally as the "whiskey and Wheaties" legislation, is scheduled for a

floor vote on Thursday. A companion measure in the House, HB 81, is scheduled for its final committee stop today. The bills remove provisions in state law that require liquor to be sold in separate, stand-alone stores.

Under current law, grocers that also want to sell liquor must do so by creating a separate entrance

for that part of the business and building a wall to separate the two.

"This is something that was put in well over 80 years ago at a time when things were very, very different," state Sen. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, said, calling the existing law archaic and antiquated. "The question now becomes has this outlived its

purpose."

The parent companies of Wal-Mart and Target stores are among the businesses backing the proposed legislation, saying it would create a convenience for modern shoppers. Publix Super Markets and the ABC Fine Wine & Spirits chain are opposed, saying it would create an unfair business

advantage for big-box stores while also making alcohol more accessible to underage drinkers.

In previous years, heavy lobbying against the measure and opposition from members on both sides of the aisle have killed attempts to remove the so-called liquor wall.

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