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Pension tax may last longer than forecast

By David Bauerlein
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As City Council faces a historic decision on enacting a half-cent sales tax for the city's huge pension debt, council members don't have any financial forecasts that pin down how many years the next generation of Duval County residents will be paying the sales tax, other than it will be longer than the previous target of 2048.

At a Monday meeting of the board of the Police and Fire Pension Fund, an actuary hired by the pension fund said his firm's analysis suggests the city will need to continue the sales tax through 2060, the maximum allowed by state law. Mayor Lenny Curry's team has said it expects the city's pension plans will be fully funded between 2050 and 2052, triggering the end of the sales tax. City Councilman Greg

Anderson, who sat in the audience during the Police and Fire Pension Fund meeting, said he wants a detailed report that actually shows on a year-by-year basis when the plans will get fully funded. "I would prefer to see when the eventual payout will be," he said. "When will that occur?" Anderson said he was surprised to hear the pension fund's actuary say that the Police and Fire Pension

Fund would only be 52 percent funded in 2047. That is the outer limit of how far the report by GRS Retirement Consulting goes. Pete Strong of GRS said based on the financial trend lines, he expects the plan will hit 100 percent funding around 2060 as the sales tax continues to pump money into the pension fund. Curry issued a statement after the meeting that linked the Police and Fire Pension Fund to John Ke-

ane, the former executive director of the fund who retired in 2015, and criticized Richard Tuten, who has been on the pension fund board since 2003. "It is no surprise that today's PFPF meeting, led by the board chair — the same organization that gave us John Keane and was instrumental in creating the pension crisis — continues to be an obstacle to comprehensive pension reform," Curry said. "What is

without dispute is that the surtax extension will fully fund the unfunded liabilities." Besides Tuten, the other four pension fund trustees joined the board in the past two years. The pension fund hired GRS in the past few months. Curry's team presented its own analysis last week to City Council, showing financial trends through

PENSION continues on A-3

Jury convicts Adkins of child molestation



Pastor Kenneth Adkins (right) sits impassively as his defense lawyer Kevin Gough talks with Chief Superior Court Judge Stephen Scarlett about a date for sentencing. (Terry Dickson/Florida Times-Union)

Pastor could spend rest of his life behind bars

By Eileen Kelley
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BRUNSWICK, GA. | In a matter of an hour, a jury of three men and nine women found Kenneth Adkins guilty Monday of eight child molestation-related charges stemming from his sexual relationship with a teenage girl and boy at his church seven years ago. The controversial, anti-gay pastor showed no emotion as the verdict was read. He will be sentenced April 25. Georgia has strict mandatory minimum sentencing laws, and because Adkins, 57, has a prior record, there's a possibility he will never again be a free man. Adkins' attorney said once his client is sentenced, he'll file paperwork for a new trial. Kevin Gough maintains the state deliberately withheld pertinent evi-

"She's in his clutches. What he has done to that girl is not only criminal, it is deplorable."

Assistant District Attorney Katie Gropper, on the female who lived with Kenneth Adkins and his wife

dence that could have called into question the mental stability of Adkins' accuser. That accuser's mother left the courtroom Monday in tears. Though not wishing to make a formal statement, she expressed her relief that the trial was over and that in the end her son was believed. Katie Gropper, the assistant

district attorney who tried the case, said all the victim ever wanted was to be believed. The young man, a specialist in the Army stationed at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, came forward a year ago and told the military about his past life with his girlfriend and Adkins. He admitted offering up his girlfriend sexually to Adkins seven years ago, when he and the girl were 15 and Adkins was 50. He said the sex was never forced, and that Adkins had been a good man to him, providing him with money and support. But he also said he didn't want Adkins to be able to do the same with other underage youth. The age of consent in Georgia is 16. "He just wanted some validation," Gropper told the jury during her closing arguments. "All

ADKINS continues on A-3

Sheriff's Office to review tactics after violence at protest

By Andrew Pantazi, Joe Daraskevich & Sebastian Kitchen
Times-Union

Three days after violence at a Friday night protest and the arrests of five organizers, Sheriff Mike Williams said he is looking at changing how police manage such demonstrations. "There's a new dynamic involved in Jacksonville that has prompted me to look at how we manage protests," Williams said in a statement. "I am working with my leadership team to determine what new protocols may be put into place to successfully manage these events moving forward." On Friday night, an anti-war rally brought out a few dozen people. During the event, protesters began arguing with a counter-protester hoisting a Donald Trump flag and using a megaphone. At one point the counter-protester, Gary Snow, appears to push against one of the protest organizers, Connell Crooms. Then Crooms ran toward Snow, and Snow waved his middle finger at Crooms. Crooms pushed

Snow's hand out of his face. At that point, police began to arrest Crooms. In videos, he appears to resist, and three officers hold him down while a fourth begins punching him. Police have not answered questions or responded to requests for public records about what happened. "Agitators, aggressors, those whose goal is to disrupt peaceful protests may engage with groups and cause the situation to degenerate rapidly," Williams said. "The obligation to behave lawfully rests with every individual involved. We encourage organizers to educate members of a group and warn them of the behaviors that are not lawful and how to not engage in conflict and confrontations, and instead respond with a calm and peaceful demeanor." The State Attorney's Office similarly didn't answer questions Monday, saying that "we cannot comment at this time about these arrests because the matters are currently under investigation. As our office does with every case it receives,

PROTEST continues on A-3

Official: Russia knew in advance of Syrian attack

By Robert Burns & Lolita C. Baldor
Associated Press

WASHINGTON | The United States has concluded Russia knew in advance of Syria's chemical weapons attack last week, a senior U.S. official said Monday. The official said a Russian-operated drone was flying over a hospital as victims of the attack were rushing to get treatment. Hours after the drone left, a Russian-made fighter jet bombed the hospital in what American officials believe was an attempt to cover up the use of chemi-

cal weapons. The senior official said the U.S. has no proof of Russian involvement in the actual chemical attack in northern Syria. But the official said the presence of the surveillance drone over the hospital couldn't have been a coincidence, and Russia must have known the chemical weapons attack was coming and that victims were seeking treatment. The official, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly on intelligence matters and demanded anonymity,

ATTACK continues on A-3

FCC reverses proposal to use phones mid-flight

By Brian Fung
The Washington Post

Federal regulators are withdrawing a proposal that would have allowed air travelers to use their cellphones at high altitude.

The proposal — introduced in 2013 by Tom Wheeler, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission — sought to roll back a long-standing regulation that banned the use of cellphones on planes over concerns cellular signals could interfere with pilot radios. New advances in in-flight communications have minimized those concerns, Wheeler argued at the time, a trend that meant the ban could be lifted.

Under the proposal, passengers would still have been required to keep their phones turned off or on airplane mode during takeoff and landing, but they could have switched on their connections at cruising altitude.

The decision Monday to reverse the proposal came from Wheeler's successor, Ajit Pai. Calling the plan "ill-conceived," Pai said in a statement he did not believe it served the public interest.

"Taking it off the table permanently will be a victory for Americans across the country who, like me, value a moment of quiet at 30,000 feet," Pai said.

The proposal initially had met public backlash, particularly from trade groups representing pi-

lots and flight attendants. Many opponents argued that relaxation of the ban would result in passengers disturbing one another with noisy phone calls and Wheeler was effectively forced to abandon the issue for the remainder of his term.

The Consumer Technology Association, which supported the proposal, declined to comment. The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which opposed the proposal, welcomed its demise.

"The FCC is making the right decision not to pursue lifting the ban on in-flight calls," said Taylor Garland, a spokesman for the association. "The traveling public and crew members do not want voice calls on planes."

Asked whether the trade group also took a position on the use of cellular data on planes, Garland said "due diligence requires a thorough assessment of the potential security risks ... and mitigation of any risks."

While most consumers may have difficulty getting a cellular signal at 30,000 feet, changes in technology are increasingly enabling the use of cellular networks in the air.

Communications satellites, drones and even lasers have been proposed as ways to get connectivity to hard-to-reach areas. This could ultimately mean more competition against in-flight WiFi, which is often derided as expensive and slow.



President Donald Trump receives a briefing Thursday on the Syria military strike from his National Security team at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach. (White House via AP)

ATTACK

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didn't give precise timing for when the drone was in the area where more than 80 people were killed. The official also didn't provide details of the military and intelligence information that form the basis of what the Pentagon now believes.

Another U.S. official cautioned no final American determination has been made that Russia knew ahead of time that chemical weapons would be used. That official wasn't authorized to speak about internal administration deliberations and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The allegation of Russian foreknowledge is

grave, even by the standards of the currently dismal U.S.-Russian relations.

Although Russia has steadfastly supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government and they've coordinated military attacks together, Washington has never previously accused Moscow of complicity in any attack that involved gassing innocent civilians, including children. The former Cold War foes even worked together in 2013 to remove and destroy over 1,300 tons of Syrian chemical weapons and agents.

Until Monday, U.S. officials had said they weren't sure whether Russia or Syria operated the drone. The official said the U.S. is now convinced Russia controlled it. The official

said it still isn't clear who was flying the jet that bombed the hospital because the Syrians also fly Russian-made aircraft.

U.S. officials previously have said Russians routinely work with Syrians at the Shayrat air base, where the attack is supposed to have originated. U.S. officials say the chemical weapons were stored there and that those elements add to the conclusion Russia was complicit in the attack.

Last Thursday, 59 Tomahawk missiles were fired on the government-controlled base in the United States' first direct military action against Assad's forces.

The U.S. has been focusing its military action in Syria on defeating the Islamic State group.

On Monday, Col. John J. Thomas, a U.S. military spokesman, said the U.S. has taken extra defensive precautions in Syria in case of possible retaliation against American forces.

Thomas told reporters at the Pentagon the increased emphasis on defensive measures to protect U.S. troops on the ground in Syria led to a slight and temporary decline in offensive U.S. airstrikes against IS in Syria.

There has been no Syrian retaliation so far for the cruise missile attack, which destroyed or rendered inoperable more than 20 Syria air force planes, he said.

Thomas said the U.S. intends to return to full, offensive air operations against IS as soon as possible.

PROTEST

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with every case it receives, we will review the facts and make an appropriate decision based on those facts and the law."

ARREST REPORTS DETAIL CHARGES

Police arrested Crooms on a felony charge of resisting an officer with violence and inciting a riot. The police report said he was elbowing and kicking an officer during his arrest.

David Schneider, 27, was arrested on a felony charge of inciting or encouraging a riot. The police report identified him as the primary organizer of the event.

William Thomas Wilder, 74, was arrested on a felony charge of depriving an officer of the means of protection or communication. The police report said he punched an officer in the back. An officer wrote in his report that he "punched Suspect Wilder several times in the face to gain compliance."

Thomas Craig Beckham, 27, was arrested on a felony charge of resisting an officer with violence. The report says he tried to pull an officer off of Crooms.

Christina Elizabeth Kittle, 27, was arrested on a felony charge of simple battery against a police officer and inciting a riot.



Police separate President Donald Trump supporters (right) and protestors rallying against his order restricting immigration (left) in January at the Duval County Courthouse. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

The police report said she tried to push a police officer off of Beckham and then punched the officer in the shoulder.

PROTESTER: 'IF POLICE HAD JUST SEPARATED FOLKS'

Dustin Ponder, 29, who is both Schneider's roommate and a fellow member of the Teamsters union Schneider is a part of, said this rally wasn't different from plenty in the past that didn't involve violence.

He called it a "routine rally" that could have been easily controlled if police separated the groups with differing opinions. Ponder estimated he and Schneider have organized about 100 events just like the one Friday without a single instance of violence.

"If police had just sepa-

rated folks or arrested this man [Snow] for assaulting protesters, none of this would have happened, just like the hundred times before that we've organized peaceful protests in Florida and in this city."

Wells Todd, a 70-year-old member of the Jacksonville Progressive Coalition, also said "police have a job to separate protesters. They didn't do it."

He pointed to the group's track record as proof of its peaceful nature. "We've held a ton of rallies and demonstrations and marches, and not one has been violent."

FORMER SEATTLE CHIEF: PROTESTS ARE DISRUPTIVE

Former Seattle police chief Norm Stamper, who was chief in 1999 when that city faced riots during

World Trade Organization meetings, said he hadn't yet watched videos of the violence in Jacksonville, but said generally it is best to separate opposing factions.

"One of the things that police must understand is that their fellow Americans have every right to assemble and demonstrate and a protest worth its name is by definition disruptive," said Stamper, currently on a book tour for his second book that addresses timely issues with policing including protests.

Seattle police had trouble managing the thousands of protesters, including anarchists, who descended on the city for the WTO conference and turned to tear gas and force. His officers were overwhelmed by the numbers, creating tactical and safety issues.

Five years after his retirement Stamper realized his mistake, which he said was the biggest in his 34 years of law enforcement, in approving tear gas against nonviolent protesters.

Stamper said it is important for police to adapt. "It does mean learning. Learning is kind of tough if you think you got it right in the first place."

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PENSION

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2049 for the three pension plans: police and firefighters, general employees and corrections officers. But the city's reports don't have any figures for the funding levels of the plans, information council members routinely got in the past.

When Curry spearheaded the Yes for Jacksonville campaign for the half-cent sales tax last summer, he said in town halls and in political ads that based on projections at that time, the city's pension plans would be 100 percent funded in "approximately 2048," at which time the sales tax would expire. Sixty-five percent of voters supported the half-cent sales tax in an August election.

The point at which the pension plans hit full funding will determine how long Duval County residents must pay the half-cent sales tax, which would start after the Better Jacksonville Plan's tax expires in 2030. By state law, the special sales tax for pension costs will end in 2060 or when the city's pension plans are 100 percent funded, whichever comes first.

Currently, the Police and Fire Pension Fund has assets sufficient to pay 43 percent of long-range pension obligations. It is one of the worst-funded plans in Florida.

The report by GRS says if the city sticks with the the contribution schedule in a 2015 pension reform agreement, the pension plan for police and fire-

fighters would be fully funded in 2035. But that would require a big increase in pension contributions that Curry's team has said would require a tax increase or drastic cuts in city services.

Mike Weinstein, chief financial officer for the city, told the pension fund board that Curry's plan is a "balancing act" that seeks to shift the city's pension costs into the future when the half-cent sales tax will pay for "as much as it can," while also keeping the three pension plans solvent and generating financial relief for the city until the sales tax starts.

"Some of the measurements used by traditional (pension) plans don't really fit this new product," he said.

Curry's plan is based on 4.25 percent annual growth in sales-tax collections. A consultant hired by the Police and Fire Pension Fund recommended starting with an assumption of 3.34 percent annual growth, saying that figure better reflects the reality that in the future, there will be recessions that push down sales-tax collections.

After city General Counsel Jason Gabriel said the pension fund board has no role in coming up with a sales-tax growth projection because that is the sole responsibility of City Council, the board said that based on a binding legal opinion of the General Counsel, it would use the 4.25 percent rate that Curry put forward.

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Assistant District Attorney Katie Gropper said all the victim ever wanted was to be believed. (Terry Dickson/Florida Times-Union)

ADKINS

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this ... is for somebody to believe him."

The state claimed Adkins was grooming the two teens — youths he was supposed to be mentoring — to have sexual intercourse in front of him.

Five of the charges he's guilty of relate to the female, who denied anything of the sort happened. She lived with Adkins and his wife until about a month after Adkins' arrest.

"She's in his clutches," Gropper said. "What he has done to that girl is not only criminal, it is deplorable."

The male accuser told the jury last week that Adkins watched them have sex so many times that he lost track. He said the sex occurred in the church office, at the beach and in Adkins' car. The male, according to testimony presented during the trial, initially told an Army investigator that his girlfriend was 16 and he was 15 when the activity first began. On the witness stand, the young man said his then-girlfriend was 15.

Throughout the trial, Adkins' attorney tried to weaken the state's case by questioning the timeframe and saying the victims were of age.

"In spite of being gross, disgusting or vile, it is not a crime," said Gough.

Gough also questioned the motives of the male accuser.

A few years ago, the male took out a several-thousand-dollar loan for Adkins and Adkins never paid it back in full. Adkins also had power of attorney over the male's money, and the male testified last week that when checking out at the commissary, he learned his account had been drained.

"The most most obvious motive here, and it is hard to overlook, is money. Money. Money. Money," said Gough.

Gough also suggested the male victim could be a narcissist or perhaps a sociopath.

"Someone who can look you in the face and lie," Gough said.

He also suggested the man, who came forward with the allegations just months before he married

another man, could have been getting back at Adkins because of Adkins' vitriol about gays, gay marriage and transgender issues.

The state, on the other hand, said it was Adkins who was motivated by sex, money and control. Gropper told the jury that Adkins did not control their decision.

"Quite frankly I'm surprised with the verdict," Adkins said in a phone call from jail less than two hours after the verdict. Despite evidence suggesting Adkins did have some sort of sexual relationships with the male and female, Adkins in his phone call continued to say he never had sex with them.

When asked about photos and electronic messages he sent, he said, "Those were bad decisions. I cannot justify any of that."

Gough too was stunned by the verdict and how quickly the jury came to the unanimous decision. "You never know what 12 people are going to do," he said.

Adkins is a former drug addict who reinvented himself in Jacksonville when he opened up a public relations firm. Some in North Florida looked to him to help them gain black votes. Adkins was fairly successful.

In multiple telephone interviews leading up to his trial, Adkins said he felt a calling to be a preacher and that's when he landed in Southeast Georgia. It was here that he made enemies for failing to make good on financial promises; for his hard-line Republican stances that tended to put him out of step with other black people; and for seeming inflammatory no matter the subject.

Jacksonville Mayor Leny Curry tapped Adkins for a panel discussion regarding the possibility of expanding the city's human rights ordinance to include gays, lesbians and transgender people. Adkins told the Times-Union he was picked by multiple pastors to trumpet their anti-gay, anti-expansion stance. He said he was paid for efforts that included posting lewd and inflammatory caricatures of former mayor Tommy Hazouri in a restaurant.

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