

# viewpoint

## OPINIONS PAGE BLOG

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# Council is ready to push pension bill to the kids



**Ron Littlepage**  
times-union columnist

I've watched the Jacksonville City Council long enough to have a pretty good idea where the council is headed on issues.

After spending several hours attending two council workshops on Mayor Lenny Curry's public employee pension reform plan, it's clear the council will approve it on the hurry-up schedule that has the council voting in late April.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the legislation passes on a 19-0 vote.

When all is said and done, congratulations will be in order for Curry and the council for kicking the can farther down the road than ever before.

If Curry's plan works, and that's questionable, the bulk of the burden of paying off the city's pension debt will fall on those paying Curry's half-cent sales tax beginning in 2031 and more than likely lasting until 2060.

In other words, current taxpayers who are responsible for incurring the debt get

to bequeath it to future generations. Yippee for us; too bad for them.

Curry uses two false premises to push his plan, and the council is buying them. One is there is no other option. The other is that failing to pass his plan will result in drastic cuts to services.

However, a second option would be to raise the millage rate now and begin paying off the pension debt immediately instead of waiting for 14 years.

A one mill increase would produce about \$55 million in the next budget year, and that would likely grow in future years as property values increase.

A mill increase, or at most a mill and a half, would go a long way toward paying off the debt, especially if bonded, as well as lowering the annual payments the city has to make to the pension plans.

"Under our mayor you are not looking at a millage increase," Curry's chief administrative officer, Sam Mousa, told the council during its workshop last week. "Absolutely not."

Just because Curry takes an option off the table doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

The City Council has the final word

and could approve a tax increase with 13 votes that would override Curry's certain veto.

The argument from some council members is that future councils and mayors couldn't be trusted to follow the path of setting aside a mill for pension debt.

Yet those same council members recognize the assumptions used to support Curry's plan could change for the worse, especially when a recession hits and it will, but they trust future councils will make the necessary adjustments.

You can't have it both ways.

The other false premise Curry uses is that if his plan doesn't pass now, the budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 will include drastic cuts because of the escalating payments to the pension plans. That threat, often used, isn't true.

Once again, the City Council could raise the millage rate instead of cutting services in the next fiscal year and buy time to come up with a better way to deal with pension debt than a plan that the Times-Union reported will cost \$4 billion more than the status quo.

Past councils have approved tax hikes

in recent years, and City Hall wasn't stormed by angry taxpayers.

Curry's main goal is to do away with the current defined benefit pension plans and replace them with 401(k)-type retirement accounts.

Getting rid of what Curry calls "dinosaurs" may be a feather in his hat with Republicans when he runs for higher office, but don't look for those dinosaurs to disappear quickly.

Current employees and new ones hired before Oct. 1 would remain in the defined benefit plans, which could last for another half century.

"The mayor's leadership and courage have gotten us to where we are today," Mousa told the council.

Uh, no.

It's not courageous to put a huge debt on the backs of future generations when something could be done about it now.

But what would be courageous is City Council telling Curry this:

No.

Sadly, that's not likely to happen.

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## Is Christianity in danger in its birthplace?



**Patrick Buchanan**  
creators syndicate

"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)"

Those are among Jesus' last words on the cross that first Good Friday.

It was a cry of agony, but not despair.

The dying Christ, to rise again in three days, was repeating the first words of the 22nd Psalm.

Today, many Christians face the greatest risk of persecution and martyrdom since the time of Josef Stalin.

On Palm Sunday, 44 Coptic Christians celebrating Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem were martyred in terrorist attacks in Egypt.

The Islamic State group claims credit for the murders, and the pictures of dead children from those churches were surely as horrific as the pictures the president saw after the gas attack.

Copts are among the earliest Christians, dating to the first century A.D., when St. Mark, one of the 12 apostles, established the first church outside the Holy Land and became bishop of Alexandria.

### CHRISTIANS ARE TARGETED

The Copts make up 10 percent of Egypt's population. They have been targeted for terrorist attacks since the 2013 overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi, who had been elected president after the ouster of longtime U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak.

Whatever they did for democracy, the U.S. interventions in the Middle East and the vaunted Arab Spring have proved to be pure hell for Arab Christians.

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Christians were left alone if they did not interfere in politics. Indeed, they prospered as doctors, lawyers, journalists, academics, engineers, businessmen.

A Christian, Tariq Aziz, was Saddam's foreign minister who negotiated with Secretary of State James Baker to try to prevent what became the Gulf War.

Before 2003, there were 800,000 Christians in Iraq. But after a decade of church bombings and murders of priests, their numbers have plummeted. When the Islamic State seized a third of Iraq, Christians under the group's rule had to convert to Islam and pay a tax or face beheading.

Pope Francis hailed the Iraqi Christians lately liberated from Islamic State rule, noting, "They are our martyrs of today, and there are so many we can say that they are more numerous than in the first centuries."

### WARS HAVE CHANGED NOTHING

Of the 10 nations deemed by Christianity Today to be the most hateful and hostile toward Christianity, eight are majority-Muslim nations with the Middle East being the site of the worst of today's persecutions.

Afghanistan, which we "liberated" in 2001, is listed as the third-most hostile nation toward Christians. The punishment for baptism there is death.

Now, a decade and a half after we launched invasions and occupations of the Muslim world in Afghanistan and then Iraq to bring the blessings of democracy, the people there who profess the Christian faith are being persecuted as horribly as they were under the Romans in Nero's time.

Where are the gains for religious freedom and human rights to justify all the bombings, invasions and wars we have conducted in the lands from Libya to Pakistan?

To justify the losses we have endured and the death and suffering we have inflicted?

## Another view: David Fitzsimmons Arizona Daily Star



## Top-ranked universities drive Florida's economy

### point of view

john thrasher,  
kent fuchs

The Florida Gators and the Florida State Seminoles have one of the strongest rivalries in the country. It takes an important cause to bring us together.

We write as the presidents of these universities to share our common mission and invite you to join the cause — to make Florida the top national destination to learn, create, work and live.

Thanks to the visionary and ongoing support particularly of Senate President Joe Negron, Speaker Richard Corcoran and Gov. Rick Scott, Florida is beginning to realize the benefit of recent investment in our universities.

Last month, U.S. News and World Report declared Florida the best state in the nation for higher education based on value and performance. Our two preeminent universities are ranked 14 and 38. But we can do so much more.

The Florida Legislature is debating the future of higher education.

Should we take our universities to the next level by investing the resources needed to create top-tier universities?

Do we need to hit the brakes because good is good enough? The answer to these questions impacts every Floridian.

We know there is a direct correlation between the prosperity of a state and the quality of its higher education institutions. We contribute by:

**Research** — such as the groundbreaking work FSU and UF are doing to treat and control Zika. Together, Florida institutions have over \$2.1 billion in research expenditures.

**Teaching** — by preparing the state's workforce for the jobs of the future in an incredibly competitive, global economy. Florida is a national leader in supporting students from all backgrounds.

**Service** — partnering with businesses and communities to share knowledge, resources and expertise. Private companies licensing technology from UF infused nearly \$2.3 billion into the Florida economy in 2015 and accounted for the employment of more than 10,600 people.

FSU's medical school has generated over \$1 billion in statewide socioeconomic impact through its regional clinical campuses that employ more than 2,300 clinical faculty who teach students and provide medical care for countless patients in rural and underserved areas.

We are doing great work, but we can and should do more.

Nationally, Florida universities are far behind our peers in several key areas.

We don't have enough faculty to advise and teach students, and we need to increase research funding, attract nationally recognized faculty and improve compensation for graduate students.

Targeted investment by the state in performance funding, preeminence funding, the World Class Faculty Scholar program, the Professional and Graduate Degree Excellence program, student scholarships and university physical infrastructure will show the national higher education community that quality education, research and public service.

We know the top institutions in the rest of the country aren't standing still.

All of which brings us back to the original question: Why should having top-ranked universities matter?

Very simply because it is a reflection of the entire state and its people.

A state with top universities is a beacon signaling to the rest of the country that it values progress, values knowledge and values economic growth and opportunity.

Tourism, real estate and agriculture drive our state's economy. Florida has long sought to add a fourth leg to this stool, and Florida's research universities have been partners in this effort by joining local and state governments in building our growing technology economy.

Having top-ranked universities also signals this is a state that values the future — not just its own but that of the entire nation, and it wishes to contribute to that future in meaningful ways.

Perhaps most important, having top-ranked universities signals that this is a state that values its young people enough to give them the best shot possible at a bright future without having to go elsewhere to find it.

That alone is a goal worth reaching. As all of our research universities reach the next level of excellence, we will transform the state together, helping Florida to rise as a leader in commerce, in culture and in international stature.

We may be rivals on the football field, but we stand united in doing all we can to continue to improve our state.

■ John Thrasher is president of Florida State University.  
■ Kent Fuchs is president of the University of Florida

## It looks like the war on drugs has returned



**Leonard Pitts Jr.**  
mclatchy newspapers

The Washington Post reported that new Attorney General Jeff Sessions is preparing a return to the same hardline strategies that have so spectacularly failed to reduce drug use since 1971.

The nation has spent more than a trillion dollars, made itself the biggest jailer on the planet and yet seen the use, availability and quality of drugs rise like a rocket from a launch pad while the cost dropped like a watermelon from a skyscraper.

That's why it was welcome news when President Barack Obama quietly dismantled much of the machinery of the drug war.

His Department of Justice radically scaled back federal involvement in so-called "civil asset forfeitures" in which police confiscate your cash and require you to prove it's not drug money before you can get it back.

The Obama Justice Department looked the other way as states liberalized marijuana laws. It also extended clemency to incarcerated nonviolent drug offenders and declined to seek harsh mandatory minimum sentences for the ones facing trial.

It made sense. So it couldn't last.

In February, President Donald Trump himself announced that there would be a new drug war and it would be "ruthless." Leaving aside that the old drug war was hardly ice cream and roses, there is no reason to believe being more "ruthless" will help.

After all, you can be beheaded for drug-related offenses in Saudi Arabia. Yet the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports that in 2008 — the most recent year for which statistics seem to be available — the Saudis seized 12.8 tons of amphetamines. So much for ruthless.

There is a reason the 18th Amendment, the one outlawing liquor, was the only one ever repealed: Prohibition doesn't work. You cannot arrest people out of wanting what is bad for them.

But as we've seen with liquor and tobacco, you might be able to educate, legislate and persuade them into wanting it less.

Diane Goldstein, a retired lieutenant commander with the Redondo Beach (Calif.) Police Department, calls the new drug war "a horrible idea."

Goldstein is an executive board member of Law Enforcement Action Partnership, a group of law enforcement veterans who think that in asking police to solve a medical problem, we've made a costly mistake.

She cites a 1994 Rand Corp. study that said that using health care strategies to combat drugs "returns seven times the value for every dollar spent on it to the taxpayer."

Problem is, that wouldn't allow some of us to brag how "ruthless" they are.

African-Americans, who have been locked up at obscene rates, even though whites are the nation's biggest users and sellers of drugs, should regard this new "war" as a clear danger.

They, and anyone else who is appalled by this, should tell that to the attorney general. You'll find an online contact form at: [tinyurl.com/kpp5yq9](http://tinyurl.com/kpp5yq9).

The DOJ comment line is: (202) 353-1555. The main switchboard is: (202) 514-2000.

And here's the street address: U.S. Department of Justice, 950 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20530.

However you register your opinion, please do.

We've already had a War on Drugs. And one was more than enough.

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