

metro

CONCERT REVIEW

Red Hot Chili Peppers rock Jacksonville

Story, B-4



mark woods

Curry's pension win fuels buzz on state post

Rumors have Gov. Scott considering mayor for Fla. chief financial officer

By David Bauerlein

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After railing against pensions as outdated "dinosaurs" crippling city finances, Mayor Lenny Curry has a brontosaurus-sized trophy in hand after signing legislation Tuesday that closes Jacksonville's pension plans to all new hires.

How will Curry use that

victory?

Speculation is rife that Gov. Rick Scott is considering Curry for appointment as the state's next chief financial officer, which would vault Curry into a high-ranking position in the state Cabinet.

Or Curry could continue as mayor of Jacksonville and use the budget relief from pension reform to focus on the unfinished

business of turning the tide on the city's violent crime problem and getting long-delayed construction projects under way.

Either way, Curry's successful push to end pensions as a retirement benefit for new employees will lift his statewide profile, said University of North Florida political science professor Matt Corrigan.

"I think the tagline coming out of this in terms of political reputation is they ended pensions and, as the

CURRY continues on B-2



Council member and former mayor Tommy Hazouri encourages Mayor Lenny Curry to hold up the document during Tuesday's signing of the new pension reform legislation. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

Court TV meets Food Network, capped off by a Queen Corrine

The trial of Corrine Brown begins this week. I'm hoping we finally get some answers to some lingering questions.

For instance, for all the impressive work done by my colleagues, starting with uncovering the details of a sham charity in another state, they still haven't gotten to the bottom of one thing: How do you make a "Queen Corrine"? And is it served with a small umbrella and mini sandbag?

The name of a cocktail served at a lavish "surprise" 65th birthday party is one of the details that emerged in court records. Donors paid big bucks to celebrate with the long-time Democratic congresswoman and, in theory, help some needy kids with their education.

It turned out that One Door for Education was about as much of a "charity" as a Hooters calendar girl and Playboy model were paid "consultants" for Veterans for Conservative Principles, the election committee for a Republican state senator who resigned last week over comments he made to Jacksonville's Audrey Gibson.

According to a 22-count indictment, One Door for Education raised about \$800,000 and did little more than open a door leading to an ATM and the bank accounts of Brown, her chief of staff and the president of the Virginia-based organization. Prosecutors say the self-described "scholarship fund" provided two scholarships worth \$1,200.

Ever since federal agents served Brown with a subpoena at a Bono's Pit Bar-B-Q on Norwood Avenue more than a year ago, she has been saying that she is looking forward to her day in court.

She said that at a memorable press conference in Tallahassee, moved by rain from the courthouse steps to a back room in the New Times Country Buffet.

She said it while handing out ice cream in Hemming Park.

At times, this all has felt like a bizarre reality TV show, part "People's Court," part Food Network.

The former congresswoman now finally has her day in court. Federal court. No cameras allowed. But local media outlets have hired a sketch artist to be there.

When I heard this, I said, "Please, please tell me it's Gary Larson." (I really miss "The Far Side.") While in Florida, he could have some fun with the news that wildlife officials launched a "Python Pickup Program," rewarding with a T-shirt anyone who catches a python in the wild. I would say that people aren't going to catch a huge snake just to get a T-shirt. But have you seen people fight over T-shirts tossed at sporting events?)

I'll save that column fodder for another day. On this one, it will be interesting to see if Brown's day in court includes a defense of One Door for Education — and, if not, whether she will finally get upset about what One Door did (and didn't do) before the feds swooped in.

She has expressed outrage at the media, at the FBI, at the prosecution that she describes as being about the persecution of a black politician (a case which, it's worth noting, started with the Obama Justice Department.)

It appears her defense

Seaside sculpture swap



Five students are each making a sculpture for the UNF Seaside Sculpture Park in Jacksonville Beach through a grant from the Lazzara Family Foundation and MountainStar Capital. They will replace the existing five pieces, which will be returned to the students who created them. Student Matt Stanford (top left) works on his fiberglass and wood sculpture of a crouching skeletal figure at the University of North Florida's sculpture lab; student Victoria Priep (right) grinds sheet metal that will be used to make her sculpture, titled "Infinity Moth"; and Jen Broadbent (bottom left) works on her sculpture, "Stombus Alatus." (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)



This photo from the Florida Department of Agriculture investigation into the March 22 Bryceville wildfire shows a barbecue lighter on the grass, photographed at the home where the wildfire began, according to state officials. (Florida Department of Agriculture)

Bryceville man charged for March 22 wildfire

By Dan Scanlan

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A 55-year-old Bryceville man faces criminal charges in the aftermath of a March 22 wildfire in Nassau County that scorched 700 acres after paperback books were illegally burned in his yard, the Florida Department of Agriculture said.

Brian Leon Sparks, who was not arrested, was charged with failure to obtain a department permit and reckless land burning following a state

investigation into the fire, according to the Agriculture Department report.

Sparks appeared before Nassau County Judge Wesley Poole April 17 on the charges, the next court date is set for May 9, according to court records. Sparks could not be reached for comment.

The wildfire began late March 22 after old paperback books were burned with other clutter in Sparks' yard on Wills Lane, according to the

WILDFIRE continues on B-2

North A1A officially marked as newest scenic highway

By Tiffanie Reynolds

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Neptune Beach Mayor Elaine Brown and Fernandina Beach resident Sarah Pelican beamed as bright as the "A1A Ocean Islands Trail" byway sign propped between them — glinting in the sunlight — on the front porch of the historic Broward House on Tuesday morning.

The sign is one of several installed along the trail beginning Tuesday.

The trail is the newest designated Florida Scenic Highway — 26th for the state — and spans 40 miles of State Road A1A from the Duval/St. Johns County Line in Jacksonville Beach to Shave Bridge outside of Fernandina Beach. It was officially designated by the Florida Department of Transportation in July 2016.

While a simple white road sign with black lettering, it marks the success of 4½ years of work for Brown, Pelican and a core group of 10 other



Neptune Beach Mayor Elaine Brown and Sarah Pelican pose Tuesday behind one of several byway signs that will be along A1A Ocean Islands Trail. (Tiffanie Reynolds/Florida Times-Union)

volunteers. Pelican was the mayor of Fernandina Beach and Brown wouldn't be mayor of Neptune Beach for another couple of years when they started the scenic highway designation process.

The pair became co-chairwoman of the A1A Ocean Islands Trail corridor advocacy group after realizing the amount of beauty and history along A1A between Fernandina

Beach and Jacksonville Beach.

"It became a passion for spotlighting that to the state of Florida as a scenic highway, as well as the original hope that it was going to be a plus for the (St. Johns River) ferry to let people know about it," said Brown. "Then they can ride the ferry and continue down A1A either

SIGN continues on B-2

CURRY

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mayor says, got the city out of the pension business," Corrigan said. "We can argue about the financial implications down the road and will there be a City Council in 30 years saying, 'Why did we do this?' But politically, it's a major step for the mayor and, I think statewide, that's helpful. This puts him in line to do other things."

Curry deflected a question Tuesday about whether he is interested in becoming state CFO.

"I am mayor of Jacksonville, Fla. and have had no conversations with anyone about being chief financial officer," he said after a signing ceremony at City Hall for the pension legislation. "So let the media do their thing."

Curry gave a similar response to reporters when he met with Gov. Rick Scott in Tallahassee April 18. Curry said at the time he met Scott about getting assistance for a Jacksonville company locked in an international legal dispute and the meeting did not involve any discussion of the state post.

"I get up every day and do my job," he said last week at the Capitol. "Let my results speak for themselves. It's flattering that people see the results and speculate, but I'm just going to keep doing my job and let what I do today speak about who I am."

Asked then if he would be open to the CFO post if Scott wanted him to fill it, Curry said, "If the governor called me to talk to me about any need that he had, issue he wanted resolved, I would always listen to him with an open ear and open mind. But to be clear, I love my job. I love fighting for Jacksonville, and that is what I'm doing today and that's what I'm going to do tomorrow."

Scott's office said Tuesday the governor does not have a list of possible appointees for CFO, a post that will become vacant when Jeff Atwater leaves next month to become an administrator at Florida Atlantic University. Scott has not set a deadline for making his decision.

Curry was in a celebratory mood as he put his signature on 14 pieces of legislation that make up his pension overhaul, which centers around shifting a big chunk of the city's pension debt into the future when a voter-approved half-cent sales tax for pension costs starts around 2031.

"This is a historic day for our future," Curry said. "All eyes are on us. There are a number of cities that are facing this crisis and they're watching us."

Jacksonville is notable because, after Sept. 30, the city will close all three pension plans to new hires: police and firefighters, corrections officers, and general employees.

Other major Florida cit-

ies like Orlando and Fort Lauderdale closed their general employee pension plans several years ago to new hires, placing them instead in 401(k)-style accounts. But those cities still use pension plans for police and firefighters.

Curry got closure of the pension plans for public safety workers, overcoming strong objections from union leaders who said Jacksonville would suffer when it competes for recruits in the sheriff's office and fire department.

Unions finally relented and approved labor contracts that will boost pay by 20 percent over three years, while also restoring pension benefits a 2015 pension reform agreement had cut for police and firefighters. As for future hires in public safety jobs, the city will contribute to their 401(k)-type accounts at a hefty 25 percent of pay.

Sheriff Mike Williams said he has no concerns about recruiting and retaining police officers. He said across the country, a growing number of law enforcement agencies are moving away from pension plans.

"I really challenge you to find one as generous as this," he said of what Jacksonville will offer new hires. "So in terms of recruiting, I think the numbers will speak for themselves as we go out and talk to new recruits."

Staff writer Tia Mitchell contributed to this report.

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SIGN

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north or south and enjoy more of our coast."

North AIA from south Jacksonville Beach through Atlantic Beach is what gave AIA Ocean Islands Trail its heritage designation. Along the road are various points of historical interest, such as the old Flagler East Coast Railway, the Jacksonville Beach Lifeguard station and the Beaches Museum and History Park.

From the St. Johns River Ferry into Nassau County and Fernandina Beach is where the "scenic" in the Florida Scenic Highway of the AIA Ocean Islands Trail can be found. The trail follows Hecksher Drive/AIA through Talbot Island State Park and smaller natural coastal islands. Amelia Island and Fernandina Beach at the north end of the trail offers drivers both natural beauty and history.

"It's almost like you're

stepping back in time for a little bit," said Pelican. "I always like going down Hecksher Drive when I'm going to Jacksonville because it's almost therapeutic. ... When you have the ocean and the natural canopies, you don't find that in many places."

The advocacy group spent years going through a detailed application and approval process with the Department of Transportation's scenic highway program. The group had to put together an application and a proposal packet, which included pictures, history of the entire route, intrinsic resources of the route and highlights of the proposed trail.

The group had to go through both Duval and Nassau County for information, as well as collect letters of endorsement from all city and county entities that could be involved with the trail.

The group worked with Debra Miller, FDOT project specialist and scenic highway coordinator,

through the whole process. At one point, about half of the application had to be redone because the state changed its scenic highway guidelines.

"It encompasses a lot of different areas of what we call intrinsic resources that are popular with not only the local community but with visitors," said Miller. "In this particular one, the three — the cultural, recreational and scenic — are the resources that are important."

As a Florida Scenic Highway the trail will be marketed internationally by the state. Brown and Pelican said that the marketing will help boost economic development and tourism in the area, especially eco-tourism. Both hope the increased interest and revenue will be felt along all 40 miles of the trail.

Brown and Pelican are already gearing up for the next steps to maintain and boost the trail. The first meeting of the Ocean Islands Trail Citizens Advisory Group will be May 4.

WILDFIRE

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Florida Forest Service.

Gusty winds fanned the flames, which quickly spread from an initial five-acre blaze to an eventual 700, sparking a neighborhood evacuation as fire ultimately destroyed two homes and damaged six more, along with other outbuildings. Local churches opened their doors to residents fleeing their homes while fire crews from Nassau and neighboring counties joined forces with state forestry workers to contain and extinguish the blaze over several days.

Investigators from the Office of Agriculture Law Enforcement initially worked with the Forest Service, which had given Sparks a notice of violation March 22 after it was determined "the debris pile

contained materials which are illegal to burn," according to state paperwork. On March 23, agriculture investigators went to Sparks' home to conduct a fire investigation.

Investigator J. Starling wrote he saw evidence of burned "illegal materials," namely papers from books. Sparks wasn't there, but Starling said he found him at a business on Rosselle Street in Jacksonville and told him he was conducting a criminal investigation.

"He set fire to a debris pile located in his backyard," Starling's investigation said. "Sparks further stated he was burning items from a garage located on the property. Sparks stated the fire escaped his control and he attempted to put the fire out, but was unsuccessful."

Interviewed by the Times-Union days later, Sparks didn't have much to

say.

"This was initially it and it was done, so I don't know what happened," he said, not willing to make additional comments at the advice of forestry officials.

Forestry spokeswoman Annaleasa Winter reiterated several times during the fire he was extremely remorseful.

The state agriculture department's 47-page investigative report on the fire includes multiple photos of Sparks' scorched back yard, filled with burnt book pages, as well as aerial images of the damage in the community.

Sparks will be billed for the state resources, including aircraft and bulldozers, brought in to control the fire, according to the Forest Service. That bill won't be tallied since the fire is still deemed active, Winters said.

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WOODS

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will be that she was busy in Washington and Florida and simply didn't know what was happening in Virginia.

If that's the case, if you used your name and face and reputation to raise money for what you believed to be a good cause and then found out later that very little of that money was actually making it to the cause, you'd be mad, too. Fuming.

But wouldn't your anger start with a charity that wasn't much of a charity?

That's one of the questions I still have. Well, that and the lingering question of how to make a Queen Corrine.



Theatre Jacksonville is turning 90 this year. Its executive director, Sarah Boone, stands on stage of the old (1938) building in San Marco on Feb. 16, 2010. (Bob Mack/Florida Times-Union)

Theatre Jacksonville announces campaign to raise \$2M by 2019

Weaver Family Foundation gets ball rolling with \$350,000 matching grant

By Charlie Patton
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During an event at the Florida Theatre on Tuesday night, Theatre Jacksonville executive director Sarah Boone announced a campaign to raise \$2 million for an operations endowment by the end of 2019, which is the 100th anniversary of the theater's founding as the Community Players of Jacksonville.

Helping get that campaign off to a good start is a \$350,000 matching grant from the Weaver Family Foundation Fund administered by the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida.

The grant will match each \$2 donated with \$1 up to \$350,000.

"That will get them to \$1 million," Delores Weaver said.

She said she and her husband, Wayne Weaver,

have been longtime supporters of Theatre Jacksonville.

"They do a great job with local talent," she said. "I'd like to see Theatre Jacksonville last another 100 years."

If Theatre Jacksonville is able to raise and invest the full \$2 million, five percent interest would generate about \$100,000 annually for Theatre Jacksonville's operational budget.

Theatre Jacksonville already has an endowment of more than \$500,000, given to it by the late Harold K. Smith, whose father was one of the founders of the Jno. Swisher and Son Cigar Co. That endowment, which is invested with the Community Fund for Northeast Florida, generates income to be used on Theatre Jacksonville's building.

In an interview, Delores Weaver said she likes

contributing to an endowment because the money becomes the "gift that keeps on giving."

She said she likes making challenge grants because "it provides an opportunity for everybody to feel ownership."

"People tell me that when we support a cause, it's like the Good Housekeeping Seal."

Boone's announcement of the fundraising drive came just prior to best-selling author Elizabeth Gilbert's talk during Theatre Jacksonville's annual benefit.

Also benefiting from Tuesday night's event was the Mental Health Association of Northeast Florida and the Weaver Policy Center.

Theatre Jacksonville donated 200 autographed copies of "Big Magic," Gilbert's most recent bestseller, to the Weaver Policy Center. People who donated \$20 to the center at the event received one of the signed copies.

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