

# metro

## BOARD MEETS

Panel expected to create computer science academy **Story, B-5**



## SUSPECT SOUGHT

Man sought in home invasion, theft of car **Story, B-3**

# Curry vows downtown renovation will get done

### Officials give OK on funds for Barnett Building and Laura Street Trio work

By David Bauerlein  
david.bauerlein@jacksonville.com

Top administrators for Mayor Lenny Curry gave a go-ahead Monday for using up to \$9.8 million in city incentives for restoration of the historic Barnett Bank Building and Laura Street Trio, which city officials have tried for years to get occupied again.

Past attempts have flopped, sometimes spectacularly. Curry said downtown development is on the move and this time, the four buildings will get restored.

“With a keen focus on increasing economic development throughout the city, building public-private partnerships and ensuring a return on the city’s

investments to taxpayers, my administration has been able to successfully negotiate a redevelopment agreement where others have stalled and failed,” he said in a statement after the mayor’s Budget Review Committee gave its support.

“Any redevelopment project I present to City Council will reflect a return to taxpayers,” Curry said. “This one is no exception.”

The Downtown Investment Authority had voted

in early February to support the incentive package as part of \$78 million worth of work to turn the buildings into a mix of apartments, hotel rooms, restaurants, rooftop bar, bank and bodega market.

The prospect of that long-sought renovation then faded somewhat from the spotlight as the city moved forward on another large-scale downtown project by selecting Jaguars owner Shad Khan’s firm

**CURRY** continues on B-4



Plans are moving forward to renovate the abandoned Laura Street Trio downtown. The yellow brick building is the 1912 Florida Life Building, the white building is the 1909 Bisbee Building and the short building is the 1902 old Florida National Bank. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

# Evacuations start; firefighters face similar obstacles Tuesday



Donnie Daniles, the emergency management director for Montgomery County, Ga., stands in the bed of his pickup to take a picture of the West Mims Fire as it burned to the south Monday after jumping Georgia 94. (Terry Dickson/Florida Times-Union)

## Predicted shift in winds could send blaze back toward St. George

By Terry Dickson  
terry.dickson@jacksonville.com

The West Mims Fire jumped across Georgia 94 about three miles west of St. George on Monday, burning straight south for at least a mile in spite of crews battling it on the ground and from the air.

The jumps were in the same area the fire spotted across the highway Sunday night, but crews stopped it as the winds died, said Hannah Thompson, a fire information officer for the Southern Area Red team managing the fire.

By early afternoon, a heavy column of smoke towered over the road as the heat built and the fire began moving. A mandatory evacuation was ordered for residents living in the southern half of Charlton County, including the Georgia Bend, St. George, Canaday Loop and Moniac.

Shane Dukes and his mother Elaine watched nervously from the crossroads of Georgia 94 and 121, and the smoke billowed unabated. Their father and husband, Randall Dukes, had stayed behind in a mobile home.

“I’m afraid, nervous, all worried,” she said. “I hate the thought of losing our house.”

She knows how that feels, having lost another in 2008 in an electrical fire.

Shane Dukes stood beside the motorcycle he had ridden from Jacksonville. He said he tried to tell his parents “to get the hell out of there.”

He didn’t get the message through because law enforcement officers wouldn’t let him go to his parents’ house. His father called, however, and wasn’t worried with a fire truck parked beside his mobile home and air tankers dropping “pink stuff,” as he called the fire retardant.

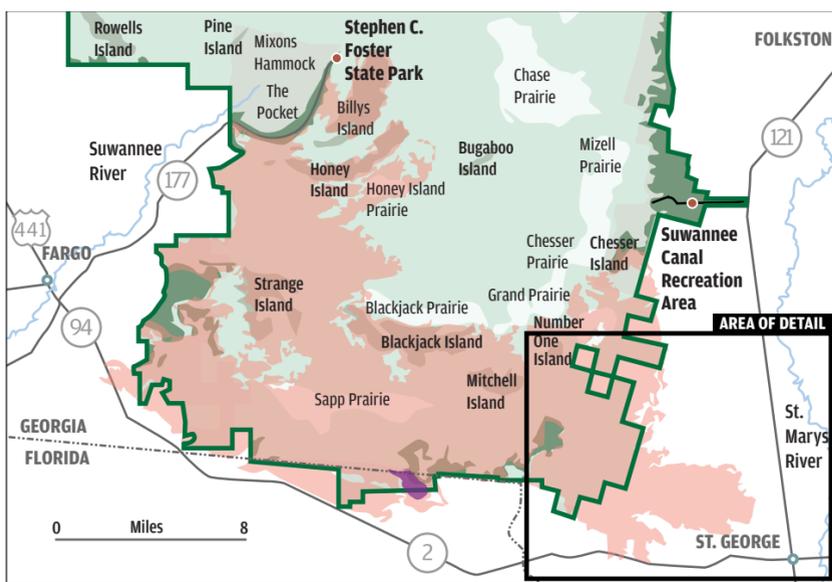
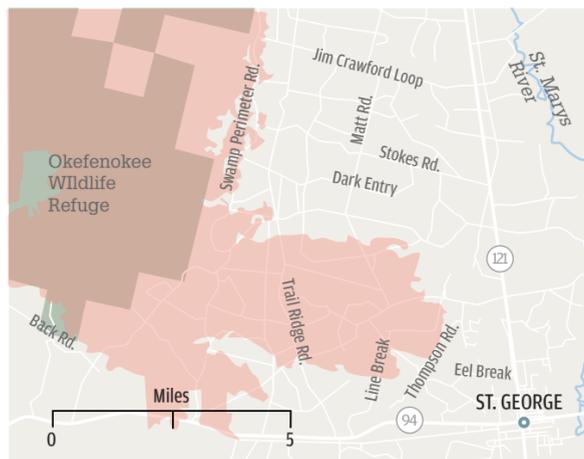
**FIRE** continues on B-3

### West Mims fire

The lightning-caused fire was reported on April 6.

- Uplands
- Wetlands
- FIRE LOCATION**
- April 8 (647 acres)**
- May 7 (133,747 acres)**

The fire continued an aggressive push to the south ahead of gusty northwest winds Sunday. The fire gained about 4,000 acres, pushing across Hwy 94 at Boggy Break, and is currently 12% contained.



Source: InceWeb

Steve.Nelson@jacksonville.com

## Challenge to vote on sales tax rejected

### Judge finds no grounds for residents’ suit over pensions referendum

By David Bauerlein  
david.bauerlein@jacksonville.com

The final word on Mayor Lenny Curry’s overhaul of Jacksonville’s pension system ended up coming from a judge.

Senior Court Judge Donald Moran Jr. ruled last week that he saw no grounds to overturn last year’s referendum in which Duval County voters approved a half-cent sales tax to help pay the city’s huge pension debt.

Five Duval County residents filed a lawsuit in July contending that the language on the Aug. 30 ballot was so confusing and misleading that it failed to comply with requirements of state law.

The lawsuit still was pending when 65 percent of voters approved the sales tax. That was followed by months of collective bargaining sessions with employee unions and then a unanimous vote by City Council in April for 14 pieces of legislation enacting Curry’s pension reform. City lawyers had been

**ELECTION** continues on B-4

## Lane found a good life on the deck of tugboat



**one of us**  
charlie patton

After Marvin Lane was discharged from the Army in 1954, he didn’t want to go back to the family farm outside Quitman, Ga. So he came to Jacksonville, where a sister lived, and began looking for work.

One stop was at the Merrill-Stevens Shipyard (later renamed the Jacksonville Shipyards) on Bay Street. He was told there was a job opening for a deckhand on a tugboat.

“I liked it when they put me on that boat,” he said. “The longer I stayed there, the better I liked it.”

Within two years he was promoted to tugboat captain.

He decided to build his own tugboat at his Westside home. It was a relatively small boat, 50 feet by 15 feet, which took two years to build. He named

**PATTON** continues on B-4

## ELECTION

Continued from B-1

confident they would win the court battle, but the lawsuit hovered with the potential to undo the legislation because the half-cent sales tax underpins all the other changes.

Moran ruled Thursday that the lawsuit failed to show that ballot language prevented voters from understanding the issue when they cast their ballots.

"A court has a duty to only set aside an election when it finds substantial non-compliance with statutory election procedure and reasonable doubt as to whether the election expressed the will of the voters," Moran wrote. "In the instant case, plaintiffs have made unconvincing allegations of non-compliance and have demonstrated to the court there is not any reasonable doubt as to whether the voters were able to accurately express their will."

Moran also rejected claims that city officials "made intentional representations and abused their authority" while urging voters to support the sales tax.

He said the "time and place" to challenge interpretations of the effect of the sales tax on city finances was during the time leading up to the election, not in a courtroom afterward.

He said it "would be preposterous" to overturn the election on the basis of differences of interpretation.

Moran also rejected claims that City Council had jumped the gun when it called for the voter referendum before a new state law took effect authorizing Jacksonville to have the election.

The lawsuit was filed by three Duval County voters who are members of the Concerned Taxpayers of Duval County and two voters who belong to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The half-cent sales tax will start around 2031 after the existing Better Jacksonville Plan sales tax expires.

## CURRY

Continued from B-1

as master developer for The Shipyards and Metropolitan Park near the sports complex.

Now, the Barnett Bank Building and Laura Street Trio are moving back to the front burner of downtown development.

The next step will be for the Downtown Investment Authority to file legislation with City Council, which could happen as soon as this month.

If the incentive package gets approved by City Council, the development team of the Molasky Group of Companies and SouthEast Group expects to start with a \$34 million renovation of the Barnett Bank Building over a 22-month period.

The Barnett Building would house 100 apartments and 50,000 square feet of commercial space. JP Morgan Chase Bank is interested in being a tenant.

The Laura Street Trio would start later and could get finished about eight to 12 months after the Barnett Building, according to a Downtown Investment Authority memo.

The estimated cost for the Laura Street Trio will be \$44 million, which includes work on the three buildings plus construction of a new building for a Courtyard by Marriott hotel.

The city's financial role would come in three stages.

After the Barnett Building is done, the city would release \$2 million to the developers. After Laura Street Trio is finished, the city would pay another \$6 million. The city's payments would be based on guidelines for the Downtown Revitalization and Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

In addition, the city would rebate 50 percent of its portion of property taxes generated by new construction next to the Laura Street Trio. The rebates, given over 20 years, would be capped at \$1.8 million. School taxes won't be affected.

The city also would work with the developers on construction of a 550-space parking garage at the corner of Forsyth and Main streets. The garage will have 12,000 square feet of retail space. Construction of the garage would take about 16 months and finish around the same time as renovation of the Barnett Bank Building.

David Bauerlein: (904) 359-4581

## Residents line up for Tire Buyback event



Workers unload used tires from vehicles in Lot J at EverBank Field during the fourth annual Tire & Sign Buyback event. (Photos by Bob Mack/Florida Times-Union)



Workers unload used tires from vehicles during the Tire & Sign buyback.



Residents seeking to get rid of old tires formed a steady line into Parking Lot J at EverBank Field. Duval County residents earned 50 cents per illegal snipe sign, with up to 40 signs, and \$2 per tire, up to 10 tires. City workers and others loaded used tires into dumpsters lined up across Lot J as a long line of participants filed through.

## Universities get boost amid University of South Florida uproar

By Lloyd Dunkelberger  
The News Service of Florida

**TALLAHASSEE** | Florida lawmakers on Monday approved a budget that will dramatically increase university funding and student financial aid, while leaders defended a performance standard that could impact the University of South Florida.

The new budget (SB 2500) will increase the Bright Futures merit scholarship program to cover 100 percent of tuition and fees for the top-performing students, known as "academic scholars." It will also extend the scholarships to summer classes and provide \$300 per semester for textbooks.

Need-based aid will increase by more than \$126 million, with the bulk of it going toward "Florida student assistance grants," the state's largest program to help students with financial need.

Operating funds will increase for all 12 state universities, including \$245 million in performance-based funds, a \$20 million increase.

The agreement provides \$71 million to universities to attract top-level faculty and researchers, with another \$50 million aimed at high-achieving medical, law and business graduate schools.

The spending increases were tied to Senate President Joe Negron's initiative to elevate Florida's universities to "elite, national destination" institutions, while

holding the schools to higher performance standards and offering more financial support for students.

But controversy erupted over the weekend when University of South Florida advocates learned a related budget bill (SB 374) had been changed Friday to increase the performance standard for "pre-eminent" universities from requiring that more than 50 percent of students graduate in four years to a 60 percent standard. USF has a 54 percent four-year graduation rate.

Currently, only the University of Florida and Florida State University have gained pre-eminent status, which will entitle them to an additional \$48 million in funding in the next year. USF and the University of Central Florida are striving to reach the pre-eminent level.

"Late at night Friday, the goal posts changed," said House Democratic leader Janet Cruz of Tampa, where USF is located. She said the school had "been cheated" out of its effort to obtain pre-eminence.

But Negron, R-Stuart, and Sen. Bill Galvano, a Bradenton Republican who oversees higher-education spending, defended the performance standard, saying it would not apply to USF or any of the other schools until next year.

They also said USF would be held to the current pre-eminence standards which are tied to a 70

percent goal for graduating students in six years and the school would come up just short with a 67 percent rate.

"No one was punished in this budget or in the conforming bill," Galvano said. "To me, moving a goal post or punishing is when someone is entitled to something and then you take that entitlement away."

Galvano also said he was open to discussing the 60 percent standard when lawmakers meet in their 2018 session early next year, before the new pre-eminence standard would be applied to the 12 universities.

"Everything we're talking about is prospective and based on future achievement," he said.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, said USF will be a financial winner in the new \$82.4 billion budget, including a \$43 million boost in operating funds and \$12 million for a downtown medical school project.

"You don't see the forest for the trees, this is a case of that," Latvala said. "That's a lot of new money."

Rep. Shawn Harrison, a Tampa Republican who is a USF graduate, said the Tampa university was "not treated unfairly" in the budget but the abrupt change in the pre-eminence standard was troubling.

"The 100,000 [member] Bull nation is rightfully upset," he said.

The budget also has raised

concerns from state college advocates, who are upset over a \$30 million cut in remedial education funding.

Galvano defended that cut, noting the number of remedial students in the 28-school system has declined after a policy change that sought to limit the number of remedial classes in the colleges.

But the Association of Florida Colleges said the reduction will result in a permanent average cut of \$1.1 million for each school, ranging from over \$4.6 million at the larger colleges to \$190,000 at the smallest schools.

More than 40 percent of high-school students entering the college system need help in improving their math skills to be able to handle college algebra classes, the college group said.

The related budget bill (SB 374) also contains major policy changes for the state universities and colleges.

It will require universities to offer block tuition, where students pay a flat fee per semester rather than a credit-hour charge, by the fall of 2018. It will create a 13-member Board of Community Colleges to oversee the state college system, which is now under the Board of Education.

The legislation also caps enrollment for students pursuing four-year degrees at state colleges to no more than 15 percent of the total enrollment at each school.

## PATTON

Continued from B-1

it The Marlene after a niece but later changed the name to Mr. Ed in honor of his father.

He spent another 2½ years building a larger tugboat which he named The Rachel after his mother.

In 1964, he quit working at the shipyards and opened his own tugboat company on property he rented on East Adams Street near the foot of the Hart Bridge. He named his company Cross State Towing, inspired by the never-completed Cross Florida Barge Canal.

In 1982, he opened a second location at the foot of Arlington Road. Today, he has a fleet of nine tugboats and 15 barges.

Over the years he's moved



In 1954, Marvin Lane went to the Merrill Stevens Shipyards looking for work and was hired as tugboat deck hand. Today, he owns Cross State Towing, which has a fleet of nine tugboats and 15 barges. He stands in his office next to a picture of the first tugboat he served on in 1954.

oil and diesel fuel for the Navy, helped in construction projects, moved houses and a small church and done a great deal of salvage work. Back in the 1970s he was hired to clean up the St. Johns River at the foot of Beaver Street. His company brought up 39 barges and tugboats that had been left sunken in the river, took them down the river into

the Atlantic and sank them to help create an artificial reef.

"I've never heard anybody say a bad thing about him and his tugboat company," said Doug Parker, a retired river pilot who is a longtime friend.

Lane, who describes himself as "85 and going strong," still goes to the office daily. There he works with his two sons, Marvin

Jr. and Marlon. It's a close family, with one son living next door to him and the other living across the street. He's still in the same house on Commonwealth Avenue where he built his first two tugboats back in the 1950s.

He's got one granddaughter, Katie, 21.

Though he had no desire to move back to the family farm after service in Korea, he learned a few years ago that it was for sale. He bought the house he grew up in and 282 surrounding acres. The farm now serves as a weekend getaway spot.

"It's real comfortable to get up there and go hunting and fishing," he said.

Altogether it's been "a super life," Lane said. "I have no complaints."

Charlie Patton: (904) 359-4413