



Councilman Danny Becton wants to see Jacksonville more aggressively pay off its \$2.86 billion pension debt using a portion of future growth in tax revenues. (Bob Self/The Florida Times-Union)

## Councilman drafts new pension overhaul to pay debt off quicker

By Christopher Hong  
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Less than two months after the City Council approved Mayor Lenny Curry's pension reform legislation and shifted its attention past the long-standing issue, a councilman wants his colleagues to consider a new plan he says could save an additional \$500 million over the next 13 years.

Councilman Danny Becton's plan wouldn't undo Curry's reforms. Instead, it would see the city more aggressively pay off its \$2.86 billion pension debt using a portion of future growth in tax revenues.

Curry's plan is a cocktail of reforms that ended pensions for new government employees and will use a special, voter-approved sales tax that begins in 2031 to pay off the city's pension debt.

To begin reaping financial benefits before the tax begins, the city will put off a large chunk of its pension debt payments into the future in order to free up money as soon as next year. That approach could free up an estimated \$1.4

billion between 2018 and 2030 — but cost the city an additional \$4.5 billion more in the long run.

It's unclear how eager other council members will be to adopt Becton's idea.

A major selling point for Curry's plan was that it would allow the city, for the first time in years, to reinvest growing tax revenues on initiatives such as public safety or infrastructure instead of paying off its ever-increasing pension debt.

Becton began his push to pass his legislation Monday with a presentation to 10 other council members, likening the idea to shortening a 30-year home mortgage to 15 years.

He called Curry's reforms a historic decision that provided greatly needed financial relief. But he said deferring pension debt payments is a costly and risky endeavor, citing the estimated \$5.9 billion price tag of Curry's plan and the concerns expressed by Moody's Investors Service, a bond-rating agency, about the "pay less now, pay more later" approach.

"We don't have to do this. We can ignore it, we can go the next 13 years and make

minimum payments on our charge cards. But somebody at some point is going to have to pay for it. And it's our kids," Becton said.

His colleagues commended Becton for his efforts, but some expressed concerns that acted as a barometer on the council's attitude toward pension reform.

Councilwoman Katrina Brown said she'd like to at least delay his plan for a year so that money wouldn't be diverted from improvement projects in her district.

Councilman Jim Love said he was concerned not enough money would be spent on city services if tax growth was stagnant in the future.

Councilman Reginald Brown said he wanted to see an actuarial study that showed just how much the city would save before he approved the plan. (Becton said the city won't pay to have a study completed for his legislation.)

Curry also weighed in on Becton's legislation. He wouldn't say whether he supported it, but he disputed Becton's assertions that his reforms put the city's credit rating at risk. He said if Becton had those

concerns, he shouldn't have voted for his plan.

"It was comprehensive. It solves the problem. It had to get through the Legislature, the governor, the council a couple of times, the voters, and unions. I think the results speak for themselves," Curry said. "It seems he needs to convince the majority of the council to see if they agree with him."

Under Becton's plan, the city would set aside 15 percent of any new tax growth to pay toward the city's pension debt until the pension sales tax begins in 2031.

The payment amount would carry over each year and grow if tax revenues increased. It would remain the same during years where there wasn't growth or decrease if the city's budget shrank.

Becton said the idea could generate as much as \$500 million if taxes grew at a rate of 3.3 percent each year.

The legislation will be reviewed by a council committee later this week. If it clears the committee, it could be voted on as early as next week.

## Nassau sees 2nd fatal shooting by deputy in 3 days

By Dan Scanlan  
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The weekend's second deputy-involved shooting in Nassau County occurred only two days after a 51-year-old Yulee man was shot and killed by a deputy following a traffic incident in Fernandina Beach in which the driver tried to ram another car, according to the sheriff's office.

The second incident occurred just before 10 p.m. Sunday in front of a home in the 5000 block of Bea Road southeast of Callahan. It left a 27-year-old man dead, Sheriff Bill Leeper said.

Deputies went to Bea Road after reports of shots fired and screaming coming from a home there, Leeper said.

"During one of the calls to 911, gunshots could be heard in the background," Leeper said.

Deputies arrived just after 9:45 p.m., and that's when a man pointed a gun at one of them, identified as Deputy James Ballard.

"The deputy fired at the subject to protect himself," Leeper said. "The result was a fatal gunshot wound to the subject."

The sheriff's office has identified the dead man as Jeremy Austin Lindsey of that home on Bea Road, just west of Lem Turner Road. Sheriff's office deputies were called to the home twice in February for reports of shots fired, Lueders said.

Ballard was hired by the Sheriff's Office on Feb. 29, 2016, and has no incidents on his record, Lueders said.

The department also released the identities of the Friday afternoon shooting victim and deputy.

Edward Everett Courtenay of Pirates Point in Yulee was shot and killed shortly after 4 p.m. Friday off Florida 200, according to Undersheriff George Lueders. The deputy involved in the shooting has been identified as Brandon Schmidt, who was hired in March

2012 after coming to the department nine months earlier as a reserve officer.

Friday afternoon's incident began when a car was hit from behind by Courtenay's vehicle while it was slowing down with traffic on the Intra-coastal Waterway Bridge in Fernandina Beach, Sheriff Bill Leeper said. Courtenay drove west down Florida 200 toward O'Neil Scott Road, initially pursued by the crash victim, the sheriff said.

Courtenay's vehicle turned right on O'Neil Scott Road, a dead end that turns into a dirt path, turning into a private home's yard and passing through a gate, Leeper said. The victim's car followed and was rammed by Courtenay a second time, just before Schmidt got to the scene, Leeper said.

Before Courtenay's vehicle could hit the victim's car again, the deputy opened fire and hit him, and he died on scene, Leeper said.

No one answered telephone calls to Courtenay's home.

Lueders said Schmidt has no prior incidents on his record. Schmidt first served as a school resource officer in the county, then was moved to patrol May 19, 2014, Lueders said.

Nassau County court records don't show any felonies for Courtenay, but he had a December 2016 citation of driving with a suspended license and a March 2016 citation for driving the wrong way on a one-way street. No criminal history in Nassau County shows up for Lindsey.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement is investigating both shootings, as per Sheriff's Office policy.

These are the first two deputy-involved shootings of the year in Nassau. Times-Union records show none in 2016 and two in 2015 that resulted in suspects being wounded.

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## School Board weighs fallout of education bill

By Denise Smith Amos  
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During her first Duval County Schools budget meeting, interim Superintendent Patricia Willis on Monday presented millions of dollars in possible cuts to district programs and services for the coming school year.

She was using early projections of the proposed state budget and the predicted effects of a controversial, catch-all education bill still awaiting Gov. Rick Scott's signature.

The budget and changed laws could erase at least \$19 million in school programs and strategies, including reductions for Teach for America teacher recruitment and training and some cash incentives for teachers at hard-to-staff schools.

But Willis soon dialed down the doom by proposing the board add back some programs if districts get an additional \$100 per student from the state.

Scott negotiated with state legislative leaders last

week to add \$210 million more in per-pupil education funding. That means a \$16 million bump for Duval's \$1.7 billion annual budget.

Without that money, Willis said, many districts would have suffered flat or declining funding. Willis presented several scenarios to the school board, including a worst-case recommendation that Duval schools dip into its reserves, called its fund balance.

"The hardest recommendation I had to make was that they look at the fund balance," Willis said after the meeting. "To go into our fund balance is concerning, but I had to bring it to the board because there are no additional funds."

Several board members rejected that option. Duval keeps 5 percent of its budget in reserve in case of emergency, though the state mandates districts keep a 3 percent cushion.

Other big hits to Duval's budget still lie in the education bill.

For instance, the bill

changes how Title I funds are spent. Earmarked for schools serving the poorest students, Title I funds can be spent by the district or by individual schools.

The new law would force Duval to send all Title I funds straight to the schools, eliminating some districtwide programs and diverting more dollars to charter schools.

Also, districts stand to lose tens of millions of dollars a year in capital budgets for school construction and maintenance, if the education bill gains Scott's signature. Charter schools for the first time would gain access to locally raised property tax revenues.

Scott has called a special legislative session beginning Wednesday to discuss funding for tourism, education and economic development and possibly medical marijuana.

The education bill has most school boards, districts and parents worried because it shortens the timeline for failing district schools to close from sev-

eral years to just two.

In Duval, that could mean three middle schools might close before the coming school year: Northwest Middle, Ribault Middle and Matthew Gilbert Middle schools.

The education bill, if signed, also would make it possible for charter schools to locate in those closed schools or within five miles of them. Students who didn't get into those charter schools would likely be bused by the district across town to Duval's remaining, eligible middle schools: Arlington Middle, JEB Stuart, Westview K-8, Fletcher Middle, Twin Lakes Middle or Kernan Middle schools, board members said.

Those closures are likely to lead to even more the following year, said board Chairwoman Paula Wright. She estimated that 20 or more other schools could close the year after the bill is approved.

She is organizing a bus trip to Tallahassee for Friday to lobby state leaders to reject the bill, she said.

## Scott approves payments in deaths, injuries

By Jim Turner  
The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE | The family of a Florida State University football player who died during a 2001 training session will receive the remainder of a legal settlement after Gov. Rick Scott signed 11 "claim" bills last week.

Many of the claim bills, among more than 30 measures signed into law Friday, came years after people were injured or killed and lawsuits were filed alleging negligence by government agencies.

Lawmakers must approve the bills because of "sovereign immunity," a

legal concept that shields agencies from paying large amounts in lawsuits. The bills direct agencies to pay amounts over the sovereign-immunity caps, which were \$200,000 or \$300,000 in many cases.

Here are brief descriptions of some of the claim bills signed into law:

**TANKER DRIVER DEATH:** Christian Darby Stephenson was driving a gasoline tanker across Jacksonville's Hart Bridge Expressway in August 2000, when another motorist hit a pool of water and hydroplaned. Stephenson tried to avoid colliding with the motorist and other vehicles, but the

tanker jackknifed and exploded, killing Stephenson. Stephenson's widow filed a lawsuit against the Florida Department of Transportation because a clogged drain had caused the pool of water. A jury found the department partly at fault. The bill (HB 6519) directs the payment of \$1,116,940.

**FSU PLAYER'S DEATH:** Devaughn Darling was a freshman football player when he collapsed and died during a training session in February 2001. Darling's family filed a lawsuit alleging FSU was negligent in its supervision of Darling, who had been diagnosed before

his death with sickle cell trait. The family and the university reached a \$2 million settlement, with payment of \$1.8 million dependent on passage of a claim bill.

**DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED WOMAN RAPED:** A 22-year-old woman with developmental disabilities was living in an Orange County group home in 2002 when she was raped and impregnated by the husband of the home's owner. A settlement was reached in a lawsuit that alleged the state negligently supervised the group home. The bill (HB 6501) directs payment of \$950,000 to be managed on behalf of the woman.

## Governor's vetoes hit House projects harder

By Jim Turner  
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The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE | Gov. Rick Scott, who fought House leaders for months over economic incentives and tourism money, used a heavier veto pen on House projects than Senate spending, an analysis shows.

In signing a new \$82 billion state budget Friday, Scott used his line-item veto power to excise \$410 million in spending initiatives. He additionally vetoed state funding for the \$20 billion public-school budget, but that is expected to be restored in a three-day special session that begins Wednesday.

Based on vetoes that Scott identified in his veto message by either a House bill number or a Senate project number, he vetoed 208 individual House member projects, which accounted for nearly half the total vetoes.

The cuts, to 153 Republican projects and 55 Democratic initiatives, totaled \$199 million and erased efforts of 81 different House members, just over two-thirds of the membership.

By comparison, the Senate, which has been more supportive of Scott's funding requests for the public-private agencies Enterprise Florida and Visit Florida, saw 44 projects, identified by project number and collectively worth just over

\$25 million, axed from the spending plan.

The evaluation is not exact because a number of projects were supported by House and Senate members. And other projects were vetoed by Scott but not directly linked to a House or Senate sponsor.

There were at least \$17 million in additional vetoes that could be tied to Senate sponsors and an additional \$6.4 million tied to House sponsors, although they were not directly linked in the budget message.

Nonetheless the data shows a definite tendency to eliminate House projects, although Scott on Monday downplayed any suggestion that a revenge motive guided his veto pen.

Scott said that he and his staff go over each line in the spending plan and determine what is "the best way to spend the money."

"It's really tied to, does it build roads? Does it grow jobs? Does it improve the education system? Does it keep people safe?" Scott said.

Pasco County, the home of House Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O' Lakes, appeared to be ground zero for many of the veto decisions, with the county losing at least nine projects, totaling \$26.5 million.

Among the Pasco vetoes was a \$4 million proposal for St. Leo University's Florida Hospital Wellness Center.