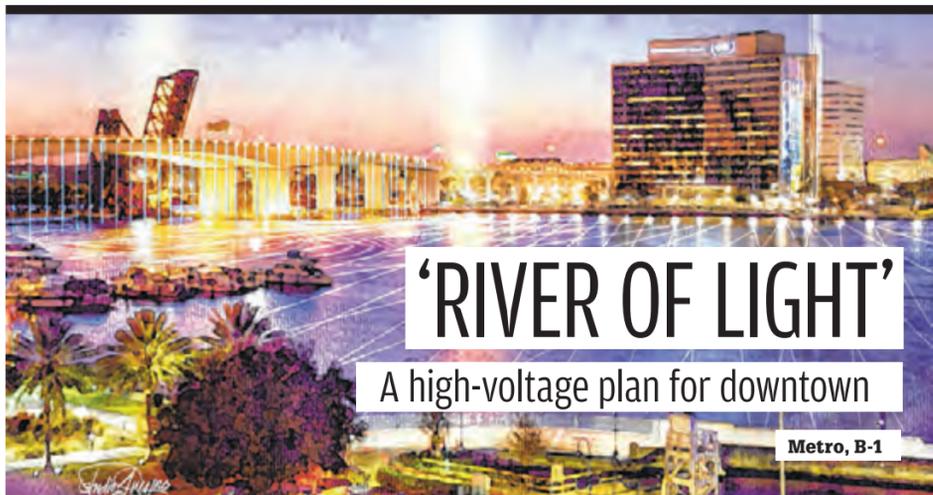


The Florida Times-Union

Thursday
FEBRUARY 9, 2017
\$2



'RIVER OF LIGHT'

A high-voltage plan for downtown

Metro, B-1

MINOR LEAGUE HOCKEY RETURNS TO TOWN

Sports, C-1



PROGRESS IN PENSION TALKS WITH CITY FIREFIGHTERS

Metro, B-1

Former Brown aide pleads guilty to fraud

Simmons agrees to testify against ex-U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown if subpoenaed

By Steve Patterson
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Ronnie Simmons, former U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown's longtime chief of staff, pleaded guilty Wednesday to a fraud conspiracy charge that strengthens the legal vise squeezing his indicted ex-boss.

Simmons, who pleaded guilty to just two of 19 charges he faced



Simmons

government about \$735,000 over 15 years.

"If you plead guilty, there will be no trial of any kind," U.S. Mag-

istrate James Klindt told Simmons before agreeing during a Wednesday hearing to recommend a district judge accept the plea. The rest of the charges will be dismissed if the judge accepts the plea.

Simmons and Brown had been scheduled to go on trial in April, and Brown is still scheduled to face a federal district judge Thursday to discuss trial preparations.

The two were indicted last year on charges that involved enriching themselves on other people's donations to a scholarship fund Brown supported, One Door for Education.

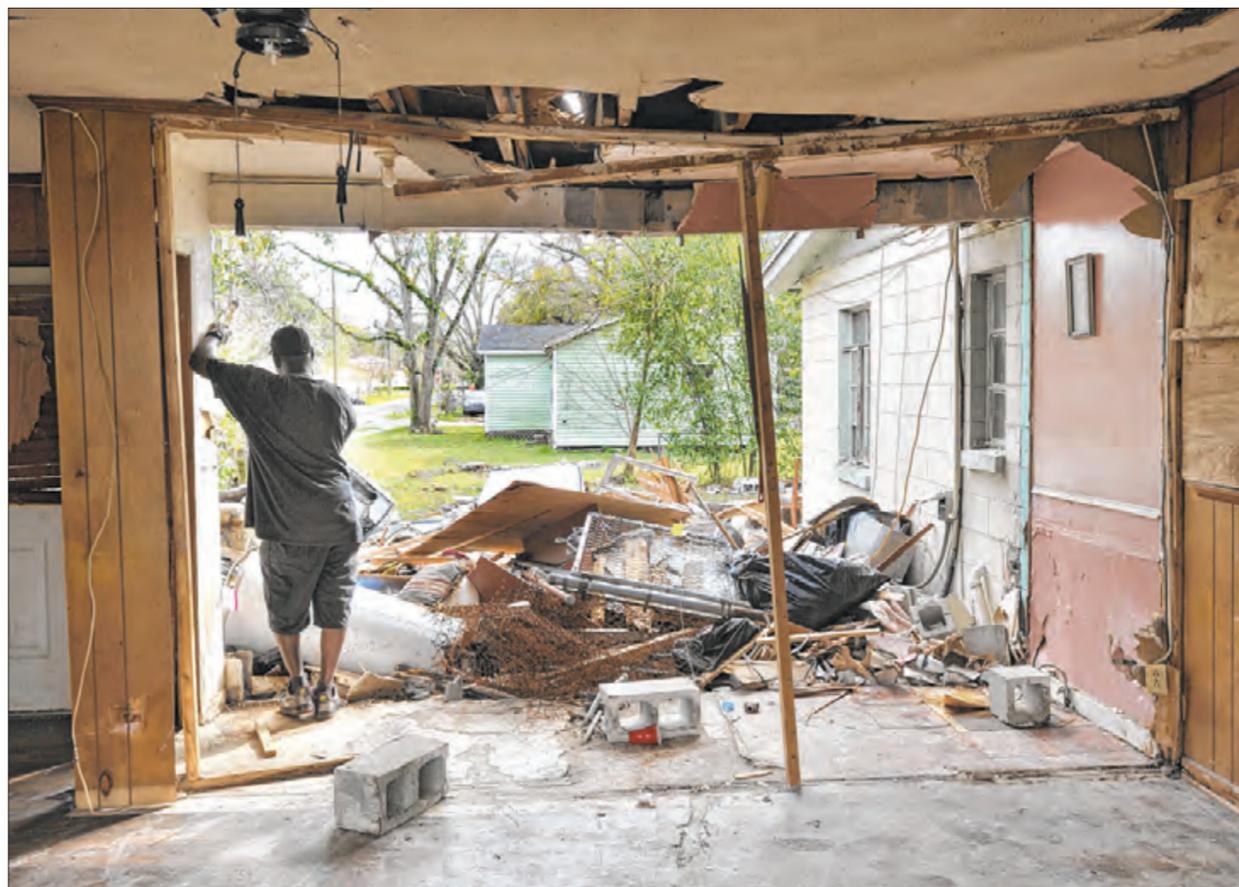
One Door's president pleaded guilty last year to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, and prosecutors said the organization spent

SIMMONS continues on A-4

SUV crashes into home, kills woman watching TV



Sarah Ruth Joshua, 66



Shed Kearse talks on a cellphone at the home of his mother-in-law, Sarah Ruth Joshua, on Wednesday. Joshua was watching TV in the room Tuesday evening when a stolen car crashed into the home, killing her. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

Family left to pick up pieces after stolen vehicle runs amok

Joe Daraskevich
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A collection of accolades and memories from a 30-year career in physical therapy at St. Vincent's Medical Center covered the front wall of Sarah Ruth Joshua's Jacksonville home. It was a shrine of sorts, made up of anniversary plaques and other tokens meant to remind her of all the people she helped over the years.

Many of the family and friends who knew the 66-year-old gathered Wednesday to sift through those mementos strewn through the home and into her backyard.

Most of them cried as they talked about the woman whose life was snuffed out the night before by an out-of-control sport-utility vehicle as she sat watching television in her living room.

Police said the stolen Lincoln Navigator barreled through the house in the 1700 block of West 31st Street about 10 p.m. taking much of the home with it. The SUV dragged two walls, a washer/dryer, a toilet and a TV into the backyard, but it left Joshua's body in the living room with no chance of revival.

She was watching TV with her dog, Lil' One, while she waited for her nephew to get out of the

JOSHUA continues on A-4

"You wouldn't expect something so horrific to happen to such a great woman."

Shed Kearse
Joshua's son-in-law

LGBT rights on brink of passage?

Full City Council to take up anti-discrimination law next week

By Christopher Hong
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A proposed law that would prohibit discrimination against LGBT people is gaining support in advance of a final vote next week by the Jacksonville City Council.

After passing the council Finance committee Wednesday in a 4-to-3 vote, the legislation has now picked up 10 yes votes in committee — the minimum majority it needs to pass the 19-member council.

The committee votes aren't binding, although the Times-Union has spoken with seven council members who say they will likely support the legislation in a final vote. The three other council members haven't said whether they support the legislation, but they each indicated support for expanding discrimination protections to LGBT people during their 2015 campaigns.

The issue has been a long-standing and controversial one for the city. Jacksonville remains one of the last major U.S. cities without discrimination protections for its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, and this year marks the council's third attempt since 2012 to enact the protections.

While it's still unclear whether the legislation would pass a final vote, supporters saw several positive developments during Wednesday's committee meeting.

In addition to passing the legislation, the Finance committee rejected an attempt by Councilman Bill Gulliford to let voters decide whether to expand discrimination protections to LGBT people through a special countywide vote.

Opponents of the legislation have demanded

LGBT continues on A-4

Sessions confirmed as attorney general over Democrats' dissent

Warren receives rare rebuke for criticizing fellow senator during debate

By Andrew Taylor & Alan Fram
Associated Press

WASHINGTON | The Senate on Wednesday confirmed Sen. Jeff Sessions to be attorney general in the Trump administration despite fierce Democratic opposition to

the Alabama Republican over his record on civil rights and immigration.

The 52-47 nearly party-line vote capped weeks of divisive battles over Sessions, an early supporter of President Donald Trump and one of the Senate's most conser-

vative lawmakers.

Democrats laced into Sessions, casting him as too cozy with Trump and too harsh on immigrants. They asserted he wouldn't do enough to protect voting rights



Sessions

SESSIONS continues on A-4

Weather
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Forecast on A-2

72

Today's high

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Friday morning's low



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NO. 40
152ND YEAR
5 SECTIONS
34 PAGES





Raymond Newkirk looks at damage to the home of his sister, Sarah Ruth Joshua, on Wednesday. Joshua was watching television in the room Tuesday evening when a stolen Lincoln Navigator crashed into the home and out the other side, killing her. (Photos by Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

JOSHUA

Continued from A-1

shower, family said. The 43-year-old nephew came home from work and needed to clean up before a dinner of home-cooked fish and grits prepared by Joshua.

“He thought somebody dropped a bomb on the house, it was so loud,” said Shed Kearsse of the nephew’s reaction when he heard the commotion from the shower. The nephew was too broken up to talk about what happened Wednesday afternoon.

Kearsse is Joshua’s son-in-law, and he served as the family’s rock Wednesday as people visited the house to help clean up and offer condolences.

“You wouldn’t expect something so horrific to happen to such a great woman,” Kearsse said as he comforted his wife, Laki-sha Newkirk-Kearsse.

Police said the Lincoln was reported stolen Saturday, and the driver who plowed through the home and over the woman fled the crash on foot.

Investigators are searching for the driver without much of a description, police said.

Kearsse said someone found a bloody wallet in the wreckage, but it’s unclear if it belongs to the driver or the person who owns the Lincoln.

He said they were quick to put up plywood to protect the rest of the home from the elements, but there’s a lot more work to do on the house. On top of that they have to figure out funeral expenses in the coming days.

To help with those needs, the family set up a funding site at gofundme.com/neighborhood-angel.

LGBT

Continued from A-1

to have the issue decided through a referendum, although supporters say civil rights for minority groups shouldn’t be settled by a popular vote.

Before Wednesday, it was unclear whether Gulliford had support to replace the legislation with a referendum option.

It failed in committee by a 2-to-5 vote.

Councilman Greg Anderson, who said earlier this week he’d seriously consider a referendum option, said he wouldn’t support it because it was too much of a substantial change from the original intent of the legislation.

Even Councilman Matt Schellenberg, who voted against the legislation, said he didn’t support a referendum.

After the meeting, Gulliford admitted he likely didn’t have the votes for it to pass. Still, he said, he would probably try again at the meeting of the full council.

The committee also overturned a change made earlier this week that would allow more small businesses to be exempt from the legislation’s ban on employment discrimination.

While opponents of the bill said the change was needed to protect small businesses from frivolous lawsuits, supporters said



Sarah Ruth Joshua’s dog, Lil’ One, recuperates after the crash.

Newkirk-Kearsse said they came up with the name “Neighborhood Angel” for the funding page because that’s the type of person her mother was.

“She’s always going to be our angel,” Newkirk-Kearsse said. “I couldn’t have picked a better mother.”

Joshua’s only child talked about how her mom used to go to Raines High football games where she would dance with the mascot and cheerleaders to pump up the crowd. Her only granddaughter, KiraFika Jackson, was the salutatorian at Raines last year before leaving the city for Florida A&M University in the fall.

Kearsse said they didn’t want to explain Joshua’s death to the college freshman over the phone, so they told her she needed to drive back to Jacksonville because her mother had to go to the hospital. The family broke the news to Jackson when she got back to town, and the fresh emotions came flooding

CRIME TIPS

Anyone who has information about the crash can contact the Sheriff’s Office at (904) 630-0500 or email JSOCrimeTips@jaxsheriff.org. To remain anonymous contact Crime Stoppers at (866) 845-TIPS.

TO DONATE

gofundme.com/neighborhood-angel

back to everyone.

“I tried to get all my crying out before she got here,” Kearsse said of his stepdaughter’s arrival. “But it’s hard to hold back the tears.”

He said a lot of times people don’t get along with their in-laws, but he would have chosen Joshua to be his mother-in-law if he got the chance.

He said Joshua kept busy after her recent retirement from a job as a rehabilita-

tion technician at St. Vincent’s Medical Center Riverside. Newkirk-Kearsse said she was always meeting new people and insisted on riding the city bus to get around town.

“I think she did that because she loved the people so much,” Newkirk-Kearsse said, although a crash early in life could have contributed to the fact that Joshua never obtained a license.

When she wasn’t cooking or spending time with friends and family, Joshua loved to watch her 60-inch TV. Shows like “Hot Bench,” “Law & Order” and “Real Housewives of Atlanta” were priorities for the beloved neighborhood fixture.

Family said they don’t know what show Joshua was watching Tuesday night when she passed away. But they said she must have been happy since the smell of fresh fish was in the air, and the TV was on.

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COMMITTEE VOTE

How the Jacksonville City Council finance committee voted Wednesday on the anti-discrimination law:

Yes: Anna Lopez Brosche, Greg Anderson, Aaron Bowman, Katrina Brown

No: Bill Gulliford, Matt Schellenberg, Sam Newby

the legislation next week.

Dennis and Morgan declined to say whether they supported the legislation, although Morgan said she supported the concept of expanding discrimination protections to LGBT people.

Councilwoman Katrina Brown couldn’t be reached for comment.

Morgan and Brown said during their 2015 campaigns that they believed the LGBT community should be protected from discrimination.

Dennis said in his campaign he opposed discrimination against “all people.” He was endorsed by a LGBT group for his statements of support for expanding discrimination protections.

So far, Doyle Carter, Danny Becton, Sam Newby, Matt Schellenberg and Gulliford have voted against the legislation during committee.

SESSIONS

Continued from A-1

of minorities, protections for gays and the legal right of women to obtain an abortion. They fear immigrants in the country illegally won’t receive due process with Sessions as the top law enforcement officer.

“Any attorney general must be able to stand firm for the rule of law even against the powerful executive that nominated him or her. In this administration I believe that independence is even more necessary,” said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. “His [Sessions] record raises doubts about whether he can be a champion for those who need this office most and it also raises doubts about whether he can curb unlawful overreach” by Trump.

Republicans say Sessions has demonstrated over a long career in public service — and two decades in the Senate — that he possesses integrity, honesty and is committed to justice.

“He’s honest. He’s fair. He’s been a friend to many of us, on both sides of the aisle,” Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, said. “It’s been tough to watch all this good man has been put through in recent weeks. This is a well-qualified colleague with a deep reverence for the law. He believes strongly in the equal application of it to everyone.”

Sessions won unanimous backing from Senate Republicans but picked up the support of just one Democrat, Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley is expected to name a replacement for Sessions as early as Thursday.

Wednesday’s vote came amid rising tension between Republicans controlling the chamber over delaying tactics by minority Democrats that have left fewer of Trump’s picks in place than President Barack Obama had eight years ago. Democrats no longer have filibuster power over Cabinet picks, however, after changing Senate rules when they controlled the chamber in 2013.

Next up for the Senate is Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., Trump’s pick for health secretary. A final vote on Price could come late Thursday and success seemed certain.

Democrats have solidly opposed Price, a staunch advocate of repealing

Obama’s health care overhaul and reshaping and scaling back the Medicare and Medicaid programs that provide health care to older and low-income people.

But they’ve mostly accused Price, a wealthy former orthopedic surgeon, of conflicts of interest by acquiring stocks in health care companies and pushing legislation that could help those firms.

This week has featured overnight, round-the-clock Senate sessions as GOP leaders are grinding through a thicket of controversial picks.

Epitomizing the sharp edged partisanship surrounding confirmation of Trump’s Cabinet nominees, Sen. Elizabeth Warren was given a rare rebuke Tuesday evening for quoting Coretta Scott King, widow of the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., in her 1986 criticism of Sessions.

King wrote that as an acting federal prosecutor in Alabama, Sessions used his power to “chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens.”

McConnell held that the Massachusetts Democrat had run afoul of rules about impugning a fellow senator.

The moment inspired a Twitter hashtag, #LetLizSpeak, and clips from C-SPAN2 went viral. “By silencing Elizabeth Warren, the GOP gave women around the world a rallying cry,” fellow Democratic Sen. Kamala Harris of California said over Twitter.

Warren was chastised under a little-used Senate regulation, Rule 19, which bars any senator from impugning the motives of any other or imputing “any conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming of a senator.”

The Senate historian’s office could not say when the rule was last invoked, but Democrats accused Republicans of selectively enforcing it. They noted the GOP did not apply it when, for example, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas accused McConnell of lying in relation to a dispute over the Export-Import Bank two years ago.

Democrats challenged McConnell’s ruling, but the GOP majority voted to uphold it, barring Warren from speaking on the floor throughout the remainder of the debate over Sessions.

“She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted,” McConnell said in words that sparked still more liberal outrage.

SIMMONS

Continued from A-1

only \$1,200 on scholarships despite collecting \$800,000 in donations.

Simmons agreed to testify in Brown’s trial if he’s subpoenaed.

Simmons and Brown both faced the possibility of sentences totaling more than 350 years if they were convicted on all counts — 22 involving Brown, 19 naming Simmons — in the July indictment.

Under the plea deal, Simmons’ maximum sentence would be 30 years, but it will be months before court officials file a detailed report recommending an actual sentence.

When the indictment became public last year, prosecutors likened One Door’s money to a slush fund that was used by Brown, Simmons and One Door President Carla Wiley for expenses like travel and car repairs that had nothing to do with charity.

The plea agreement that Simmons, 51, signed this month described him playing a key role in One Door.

The agreement said he, Brown and people around the congresswoman did almost all of One Door’s fundraising, with Brown asking for money during private meetings with donors and Simmons emailing the next day to make sure people lived up to their pledges.

A lot of Brown’s requests were made when she asked for donations to her Friends of Corrine Brown political committee, her legal defense fund or another PAC, the agreement said.

Simmons’ attorney, Anthony Suarez, said many people who wrote checks to One Door may have been more interested in having a contact in Washington

than in helping scholarship candidates.

“They wanted access” to Brown, a 12-term member of Congress, he said. “For most donors, they didn’t really care.”

He said Simmons accepted the plea deal after concluding that “a total acquittal was not likely” and deciding to follow his conscience.

“Ronnie is aware that he has a price to pay for his mistakes,” Suarez said after the hearing, which Simmons left without talking to reporters.

That price includes restitution payments, which Assistant U.S. Attorney A. Tysen Duva told Klindt are being finalized but total about \$1 million so far.

Simmons’ plea could carry real importance for Brown, too. He was her employee for a quarter-century, and part of a circle of supporters she relied on. If Simmons testifies at Brown’s trial, he could be among the most damaging in a long list of associates expected to be called as witnesses.

The indictment mentioned others, identified by labels like Person A, who prosecutors said played important parts in Brown’s financial dealings. That list included Von Alexander, a part-time staffer who also did contract work for the Jacksonville Transportation Authority and worked on arrangements for a golf tournament bearing Brown’s name where participants wrote checks to One Door.

An Orlando lobbyist closely involved with Brown’s political organization, Lavern Kelly, was also called to testify at grand jury hearings before the indictment was handed down, and could be called as a trial witness.

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