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The Florida Times-Union

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Curry pulls plug on JEA sale

By David Bauerlein
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Mayor Lenny Curry on Thursday took the sale of JEA off the table, saying flatly in a statement that he will not submit any JEA privatization plan to the City Council.

In doing so, Curry said the discussion over selling the city's electric and water utility "was hijacked by a few special

interests and politicians with an agenda to put politics above all else."

Discussions about possibly selling JEA have popped up every four or five years, but it went much farther this time because the idea came from JEA board members. JEA employees reacted angrily by wearing red "JEA is Ours" shirts as they packed City Hall. Union leaders and some

council members contended Curry was plotting behind the scenes to engineer the sale of JEA. Curry denied it. Former Mayor Jake Godbold wrote to Curry to say, "Your credibility is being damaged and your motives are being questioned."

Council members said their constituents mostly opposed a sale, leaving few advocates to push for a highly

complex transaction involving the nation's eighth-largest municipal utility.

In a two-page statement released Thursday, Curry said the focus should be on strengthening JEA "for the years ahead."

"This strategic planning and long-term commitment to JEA employees and customers is also why I am choosing to state unequivocally that I will

not submit any JEA privatization plan to the City Council," Curry said in the statement.

JEA board Chairman Alan Howard said he agrees with Curry's sentiments.

He said the JEA board never took a position in favor of privatization, but instead sought to raise the question for community debate.

See JFA, A7

Khan wants Wembley



Jacksonville Jaguars and the Indianapolis Colts play in the NFL International Series at Wembley Stadium in London on Sunday, Oct. 2. [BOB MARTIN/NFL]

By Ryan O'Halloran
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Shad Khan is on the cusp of adding London's iconic Wembley Stadium to his high-profile portfolio that includes the Jacksonville Jaguars, the soccer team Fulham, and the Four Seasons hotel in Toronto.

Khan's offer, worth an estimated \$835 million, to the Football Association

What is Wembley? in England for the 90,000-seat venue was reviewed by officials Thursday, and Jaguars President Mark

Lamping expects the deal to close in "maybe eight weeks or so."

See WEMBLEY, A2

Players, fans party on draft night



With the help of former Jaguars running back Fred Taylor, Yannick Nagakoue, Calais Campbell, Keelan Cole and Dede Westbrook give a rousing Duval cheer for the crowd in Daily's Place during the Jacksonville Jaguars Uniform Launch and Draft Party at EverBank Field on Thursday. Read the Times-Union's full coverage of the NFL Draft at Jacksonville.com. [BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

Cosby found guilty, lashes out

Comedian convicted of drugging, molesting woman in '04; directs outburst at prosecutor

By Michael R. Sisak and Claudia Lauer
The Associated Press

NORRISTOWN, Pa. — Bill Cosby was convicted Thursday of drugging and molesting a woman in the first big celebrity trial of the #MeToo era, completing the spectacular late-in-life downfall of a comedian who broke racial barriers in Hollywood on his way to TV superstardom as America's Dad.

Cosby, 80, could end up spending his final years in prison after a jury concluded he sexually violated Temple University

employee Andrea Constand at his suburban Philadelphia mansion in 2004.

He stared straight ahead as the verdict was read but moments later lashed out loudly at District Attorney Kevin Steele after the prosecutor demanded Cosby be sent immediately to jail. Steele told the judge Cosby has an airplane and might flee.

Cosby angrily denied he has a plane and called Steele an "a--hole," shouting, "I'm sick of him!"

Judge Steven O'Neill judge decided Cosby can remain free on \$1 million bail while he awaits sentencing but restricted him to Montgomery County, where his home is. No sentencing date was set.

See COSBY, A7



Bill Cosby leaves his sexual assault trial at the Montgomery County Courthouse, Thursday in Norristown, Pa. Cosby was found guilty. [COREY PERRINE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

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SATURDAY
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Beach breeze
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FOOD PARTNERS

JEA

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"While it was appropriate to ask the question and I believe that yielded some good and necessary discussion around the issue, it's clear there's no consensus in the community or on City Council in favor of privatization, and that's okay," Howard said. "I think the mayor's exactly right that we need to get back to our business of serving our customers, supporting our employees and building value for our stakeholders."

He said the board's focus will be on hiring a permanent CEO to replace Paul McElroy, who stepped down two weeks ago, so JEA can be in position to "meet the challenges of a dynamic marketplace."

Duval County Democratic Party Chairwoman Lisa King proclaimed victory.

"We got Curry to say Uncle!" King tweeted in a post that said the "only way" to ensure continued ownership of JEA is to defeat Curry and his "hand-picked" council candidates in the 2019 election.

Curry's announcement comes five months after Tom Petway, in his final JEA board meeting, triggered the debate when he said JEA and the city should explore whether the utility's customers "would be better served in the private marketplace" and whether the city should "consider the financial benefits" that would come from selling JEA.

After a consultant hired by JEA issued a report in February saying the time might be right to sell the utility based on the high sales prices in the utility market, City Council President Anna Brosche formed a special committee to do fact-finding on the the pros and cons of privatization.

Curry quickly supported the recommendation from Petway, who is one of the mayor's major campaign supporters, to do an evaluation of the utility. But Curry repeatedly said he was undecided on whether the city should put JEA up for sale.

"I never proposed any privatization plan, nor did I ever suggest or say to anyone that I would propose such a plan," Curry said in his statement. "Instead, as I have consistently stated, I did not believe I had enough information to correctly contemplate such a proposal."

City Councilman Jim Love said Curry's decision will help wind down the contentious debate and stop further discussion and studies by the city or JEA about privatization.

"I'm glad that Mayor Curry did what he did," Love said. "I want to make JEA better, not sell it."

Love said he expects a strong majority of council members will agree when they vote in May on a resolution he introduced in favor of the city keeping ownership of JEA.

"I have two other co-introducers and Shad Khan with me, which is nice," Love said in reference to the

Jacksonville Jaguars owner saying last week that selling JEA would be a "terrible idea."

Notwithstanding Curry's statement, City Councilman Matt Schellenberg said he will proceed with seeking council support for a competing resolution he filed directing the mayor and JEA to proceed with a study of privatizing all or part of JEA.

Schellenberg said the Public Financial Management Report released in February, which found the city could net \$2.9 billion to \$6.4 billion from selling JEA, was just a "thumbnail" analysis and the range was so wide that the report "was almost worthless, unfortunately."

"The group that did it, they just guessed," Schellenberg said. "Guessing is not in my lexicon."

He said the city needs a detailed analysis by a firm with expertise in the field of pinpointing the dollar value of utilities. He said the in-depth analysis also would examine how JEA will adjust to industry changes over the next 20 years.

"Does it make sense to sell it?" Schellenberg said. "That's all I really want to know, and we can't determine that if we don't have a comprehensive evaluation of what our asset is, period."

Curry said that since 1999, city ordinances say the mayor can consider whether the functions served through government would be better done through privatization, and that such a change can happen "if and only if" the mayor gives the City Council a privatization plan.

Curry said when discussion of JEA turned to possible privatization, he met with JEA leaders, municipal-utility experts, financial experts, union leaders and JEA workers.

He said a "clear and reasonable process" for the discussion was "hijacked by special interests" and politicians, whom he did not name. "Fixed on the false choice of 'sell' versus 'don't sell,' they created an environment fostering misinformation and mistrust," Curry said.

Curry said the debate shined a light on some of the challenges facing JEA as renewable energy becomes more affordable and customers are becoming more efficient in their electricity and water use, which has flattened overall consumption even as JEA added more customers.

JEA also must deal with its financial commitments for construction of nuclear power units at Plant Vogtle in Georgia, which is costing more than expected when JEA inked the agreement a decade ago amidst projections for growing electric demand that didn't pan out.

Love said JEA faces some challenges and should move quickly as possible to conduct a national search for a permanent CEO to chart a course based on city ownership for "many, many, many years to come."

"There are a lot of people out there who would love to live in Jacksonville and have that challenge," Love said.

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Senate panel OKs bill to safeguard Mueller

By Chad Day and
Mary Clare Jalonick
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Bipartisan legislation to protect special counsel Robert Mueller now lies in the hands of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell after the GOP-led Senate Judiciary Committee voted Thursday to advance it.

McConnell, R-Ky., has said the bill is unnecessary and he won't let it reach the Senate floor. But the chairman of the Senate

Judiciary Committee added to the pressure on McConnell by voting for the measure and saying McConnell should change his mind.

"While my constitutional concerns remain, I believe this bill should be considered by the full Senate," said Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

Republicans have split on the issue amid President Donald Trump's repeated criticism of Mueller's Russia investigation. That break was apparent Thursday as

four Republicans joined Democrats in the 14-7 vote to pass the legislation from committee. For now, the move is largely symbolic, given McConnell's opposition, but it shows the complexity of Republican support for Trump when it comes to the president's attacks on Mueller.

Nearly all GOP senators say Trump shouldn't fire Mueller. But Republicans who support the legislation say it's necessary to guard against presidential interference by giving

Congress more oversight power.

Two Republicans and two Democrats introduced the bill this month as Trump ramped up criticism of Mueller, who is investigating potential ties between Russia and Trump's 2016 campaign as well as possible obstruction of justice by the president.

Trump appeared to suggest Thursday he has no intention of trying to fire Mueller, for now. But he left open the possibility he could change his mind.

COSBY

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Cosby waved to the crowd outside the courthouse, got into an SUV and left without saying anything. His lawyer Tom Mesereau declared "the fight is not over" and said he will appeal.

Shrieks erupted in the courtroom when the

verdict was announced, and some of Cosby's accusers whimpered and cried. Constand remained stoic, then hugged her lawyer and members of the prosecution team.

"Justice has been done!" celebrity attorney Gloria Allred, who represented some of Cosby's accusers, said on the courthouse steps. "We are so happy that finally we can say women are believed."

The jury of seven men

and five women deliberated 14 hours over two days.

The verdict came after a two-week retrial in which prosecutors had more courtroom weapons at their disposal than they did the first time: They put five other women on the stand who testified that Cosby, married for 54 years, drugged and violated them, too.

At Cosby's first trial, which ended in a

deadlocked jury less than a year ago, only one additional accuser was allowed to testify.

After the verdict, the district attorney became teary-eyed as he commended Constand for what he said was courage in coming forward. As Constand stood silently behind him in a bright white blazer, Steele apologized to her for a previous DA's decision in 2005 not to charge Cosby.

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