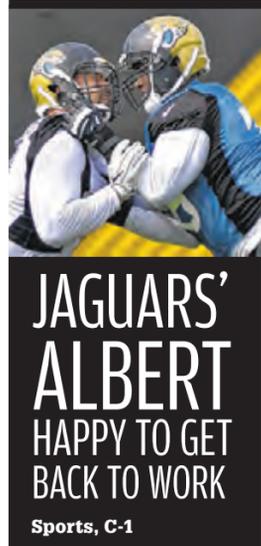


The Florida Times-Union

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GATORS FIND NEW PITCHING DEPTH

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Sessions denies collusion with Russia

Attorney general defends role in Comey firing, refuses to discuss talks with Trump

By Joseph Tanfani, David S. Cloud & Noah Bierman
Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON | In an often combative defense of his brief tenure as the nation's top lawman, Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Tuesday forcefully denied any improper contacts with Russian officials and called any suggestion that he aided Russian efforts to influence

the 2016 election "an appalling and detestable lie."

Appearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sessions also vigorously defended his role in the firing of FBI Director James Comey last month even though he previously had recused himself from the investigation that Comey was leading into Russia's role in the campaign and any ties with Trump's aides.

Sessions frequently said that he could not remember details of meetings and conversations — and even could not say for certain whether he met for a third time with Sergey Kislyak, Russia's envoy in Washington, during a hotel reception in April last year. He did not rule out such a meeting but repeatedly said he did not recall it.

"It's conceivable that it occurred. I just don't remember it," he said.

Alternately angry and def-

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Attorney General Jeff Sessions frequently said he couldn't recall details of meetings and talks. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

MORE INSIDE

Trump allies question Mueller probe. A-8

Character, safety at core of battle against development



The intersection of County Dock and Mandarin roads would see an increase in traffic if proposed subdivision access to County Dock is approved. Many Mandarin residents oppose a planned 21-house subdivision on 9 acres that would feed onto a narrow stretch of County Dock. The road is only 16 feet wide in places and is already difficult to navigate. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

By Amanda Williamson
amanda.williamson@jacksonville.com

Large heritage oak trees stretch across County Dock Road, a sliver of concrete in Mandarin that forms a piece of Jacksonville's only Scenic and Historic Corridor.

The oaks, draped in Spanish moss and curled with age, will most likely always be there. Even as the neighborhood shifts around them, the trees remain protected by city law.

What could be lost, however, is the low-density, historic nature of about 9 acres abutting the well-traveled road.

Residents say a developer wants to bulldoze the property to build a new subdivision containing at most 21 single-family homes, and their concern is the city will let it happen. Those immediately impacted feel their safety on County Dock Road is at stake, but also the



A garbage truck has to stop, back up from Loretto Road and then turn again to make the turn from County Dock Road on Friday. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

dense canopy and rural character of their tucked-away haven.

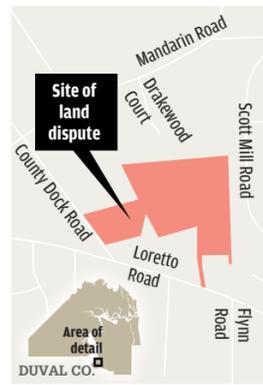
As the proposal works its way through various city commissions, however, it could have much larger implications.

Mandarin residents feel the city is both ignoring community desires and disregarding its own laws to recommend ap-

MANDARIN continues on A-4

Disputed Mandarin project

Hundreds of Mandarin residents and a property developer are at odds over a project that could put about 20 new homes into a historic part of the community.



Steve.Nelson@jacksonville.com

Both sides weigh in on controversial education bill

By Brandon Larrabee
The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE | With a controversial and wide-ranging education bill now on his desk, Gov. Rick Scott faces intense pressure from both sides as he weighs whether to sign or veto the legislation.

Rumors have begun floating Scott will sign HB 7069 later this week, but officially the governor maintains that he hasn't made a final decision.

Scott received the bill late Monday; he has until June 27 to sign the proposal, veto it or allow it to become law without his signature.

The 278-page bill, which emerged in the closing days of the regular legislative session, deals with everything from charter schools and standardized tests, to sunscreen and school uniforms.

The legislation was a priority of House Speaker Richard Corcoran, R-Land O' Lakes, and opponents fear that Scott agreed to sign the bill in exchange for having his priorities approved during a special session last week.

But at an event Tuesday to celebrate the outcome of the special session, Scott told reporters he was still considering the measure.

"We all want school choice," Scott said. "We want to make sure our kids go to the best schools. ... With regard to 7069, I'm still reviewing it. I know

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MANDARIN

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proval. City staff, they say, cater to developers and corporations, while giving little concern to those who actually live near the proposed project.

In Jacksonville, a far-flung city with a handful of unique, landmark neighborhoods, what does this mean for the future of development here?

"Jacksonville got so used to unlimited supplies of land, but now, we don't have land forever. If someone goes to build something, it's going to be in someone's backyard," said Jeff Edwards, a County Dock Road resident who opposes the project. "At some point, we have to draw the line, we have to ask: How far do you intrude into this historic and scenic area?"

Mandarin Road and County Dock Road meander through extensive tree canopy dotted by riverfront, estate-sized residences and historical structures. They weave past refurbished farmhouses and the Walter Jones Historical Park, an 11-acre plot of land which houses an 1875 homestead farmhouse, barn and outbuildings.

The roads feel more like they've been scooped from the rural parts of Charleston, N.C., or Savannah, Ga., and plopped here in Jacksonville — rather than actually originating in what's now bustling Mandarin.

But, history runs deep in this southeast neighborhood and its residents haven't forgotten.

"DEVELOPING PARADISE"

Plans for Docksides Estates began to take shape in early 2016. Nothing solid existed then, but it wouldn't be long.

Helen Simon owns 9.3 acres sandwiched between County Dock Road, Mandarin Road and Loretto Road. She has one narrow driveway that exits south onto Loretto. Her property is currently zoned to accommodate one house per acre, a common zoning size throughout the Mandarin Road area.

However, in May 2016, Simon signed authority to attorney Paul Harden to act as an agent in filing rezoning applications.

By December 2016, the city of Jacksonville received a request to change the property from its current status to a designation that would allow up to seven homes per acre. According to a Planning and Development Department report, the subdivision plans contain only 21 homes at about three per acre.

The department suggested City Council approve the project with several conditions: The Loretto Road access should be eliminated and both a traffic and environmental impact study be completed and submitted for review.

Even more, the department — which refused to comment about the project other than what it indicated in the report — stated the future development would meet all goals listed in Jacksonville's comprehensive plan, including ensuring the character and location of the area. The land uses, they stated, would optimize the economic benefit and enjoyment and environmental protection of natural resources.

EDUCATION

Continued from A-1

the speaker's very passionate about it. It was something that was very important to him."

The legislature's passage of the bill was greeted by a firestorm of protest from school boards, superintendents, the state's main teachers and other education advocates. Scott even made comments that hinted that he was considering a veto.

Critics of the bill said provisions meant to help charter schools move into neighborhoods with academically struggling schools, as well as a portion of the bill that would allow charter schools to tap lo-



County Dock Road residents Jeff Edwards and Rosalind Sandell talk in the driveway of Sandell's property. It is next door to an access point to a proposed subdivision. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

LAND USE AND ZONING MEETING IS SET

The Planning Commission voted to recommend denying approval of the rezoning application. However, it is a nonbinding recommendation to City Council.

A City Council Land Use and Zoning meeting will be held June 20 at 4:45 p.m. at City Hall, 117 West Duval Street. The meeting will be in the City Council Chambers on the first floor.

"I certainly don't have a problem with 90-foot lots in that area," said Planning Commissioner Chris Hagan during a May 18 meeting. "I think that is exactly what this area is asking, not the community, but the area is needing."

Residents who live there feel another way entirely.

"A MAIN THOROUGHFARE."

County Dock Road connects Loretto Road and Mandarin Road, but it's also a shortcut for people hoping to avoid San Jose Boulevard's heavy traffic, said Edwards.

The street is only about 16-feet wide and — even by county standards — is considered substandard. Two cars can barely pass each other on the street, and trucks must move to the side if another truck tries to pass.

However, an ordinance dubbing the road a Historic and Scenic Corridor protects it from being widened. It is part of Jacksonville's only cluster of such roads. Highway A1A, a national scenic corridor, is not protected by city laws.

Rosalind Sandell and her husband Dennis live on the corner of County Dock and Loretto Road, where they've been for the last 30 or so years. They've only thought about leaving once, she said, when a large church moved in across the street.

Now, she isn't so sure. Already, she worries about traffic. They've had at least seven cars plow through their fence — all, she assumes, lost control as they made that turn from Loretto to County Dock.

It's a blind turn. It's a turn people seem to take without slowing down.

"If they put 21 more homes exiting onto County Dock Road, especially with these half-million dollar homes Harden says they are going to put there, it really is a safety concern," Sandell said. "If we didn't have our fence cemented in, we'd probably already have a car in our living room."

As traffic increases, sometimes 40 cars deep at the stop sign near her

house, accidents become all too familiar.

Jacksonville planning staff, however, doesn't contest the issue. The City Planning Commission recommended City Council deny approval of the zoning change solely on the fact the road wasn't safe enough to navigate.

During a recent planning meeting, commissioners wondered just how safe the road actually was.

"It's not safe right now," said Laurie Santana, chief of the Transportation Planning Division. "Like they were saying, they can't maneuver in and out. You can't get fire trucks through there. You can't get school buses through there. So, as it is, it's a very constrained narrow roadway."

That left several planning commissioners, including Donald Adkinson, questioning how residents, city employees and others would access the Docksides Estates property.

If Loretto Road could be used, he said, then the project made more sense. Loretto Road is nearly double the width of County Dock.

For some reason, however, the project can't use it. Planning Commissioners were told by staff that decision was handed down by the director.

Harden didn't return two telephone calls and the City Planning Department would not provide anyone to discuss why that's the case. So, the issue remains unexplained.

"If we can't do anything with County Dock Road, what's the other solution?" Commissioner Dawn Motes asked at the May 18 meeting. "That's the million-dollar question. ... There's no other solution or recommendation for safe access?"

According to Planning Department staff, the only option available would be turning County Dock Road into a one-way street. It's an unpopular opinion, they added.

To Edwards, it is more than just unpopular. It is unfair. For decades, people living in the area have traveled freely on County Dock Road. To accommodate this one development,

the city suggests changing that.

Planning Commission chairman Daniel Blanchard agreed, telling others on the commission it wasn't a viable, reasonable option.

"The entire focus that came through to me as a resident at the Planning Commission meeting: We need to find a way to accommodate Harden and the developer," Sandell said.

Susie Scott, president of the Mandarin Community Club, agreed: "I once spoke to someone with the state department, an official with a regulatory agency, who told me 'I'm not in the business of denying approval. I'm in the business of finding a way to get it approved.' That was a real eye-opener for me."

For her, that same attitude permeates through Jacksonville.

"CHARACTER OF THE AREA"

Surrounding nearly all sides of what could become Docksides Estates is property with homes on wide, expansive laws.

Undeveloped plots of land keep the tree canopy rich and vibrant. Spacious yards mean the neighborhood doesn't feel cramped or cluttered.

To keep it that way, Jacksonville City Council passed an ordinance in 2007 that allows developers to build only one home on one acre.

After a developer found a loophole to that law, council members amended the ordinance in 2009 and strengthened it. Now, within an area called the Mandarin Overlay, developers can only build one house per one acre. That means developments must provide space for roads, retention ponds and other necessary parts to a community outside of the plots dedicated to homes.

The overlay also says properties within 2,000 feet of a historical structure are protected, as well — even if they reside outside the Mandarin Overlay.

"This is my district, and I'm certainly very familiar with this area and with the Mandarin community," Blanchard said. "I'm certainly a supporter of property rights and smart development, but I just, I'm uncomfortable with this because of the density and because of the access."

Much like other residents in the community, Blanchard felt the subdivision would bring too many homes and too much traf-

fic to County Dock Road. Even if the access could be moved, he said, the nature of the surrounding area made this proposal seem out of character.

It isn't a good fit, Blanchard concluded.

The fact that the parcel rests just outside the Mandarin Overlay, said Scott, means it should at most be a transitional property between the low-density Mandarin Overlay and any development on the south side.

"This parcel is on a unique roadway that already has specific protections in place. Why would anyone want to disregard what has already been legislated, what's already been defended in court and prevailed? And why would anyone want to destroy one of Jacksonville's most historic, most unique and most desirable neighborhoods?" Scott said. "If that's not protected, it will look like the rest of Jacksonville. They will just mow it down and build over it, and that unique character will be lost forever."

In fact, residents like Edwards and Scott believe the Planning Department — in its approval — ignored many key facts about the nature of the area. Ownership patterns, Edwards said, show the plot of land is surrounded mostly by the larger, lower density lots. The department fails to address protection of the natural tree canopy or the wetlands on site.

Even more, Edwards said the department report approved the project because it would provide a variety of housing. However, he said, the development plans show no such thing. Other than density, the homes will be equivalent to others in the area.

Within the guiding principles of Jacksonville's Vision Plan, it discusses protecting existing neighborhoods from development and re-development, Scott said. Scott assisted in the creation of the vision plan, but she also helped draft the ordinances associated with the Mandarin Overlay.

"When we wrote the guiding principles for the land-use plan, we understood that Jacksonville was growing. We knew that infill was necessary — and desired," she added. "We wrote the guiding principles believing those principles would lead us toward smart development, instead of unchecked, unsightly, random development."

SESSIONS

Continued from A-1

erential in tone, Sessions offered a staunch defense of his actions, and just as steadfastly refused to describe his interactions with President Donald Trump other than to say the president's words and tweets "speak for themselves."

"Let me state this clearly, colleagues: I have never met with or had any conversation with any Russians or foreign officials concerning any type of interference in any campaign or election in the United States," Sessions declared.

Sessions repeatedly refused to reveal anything about his conversations with Trump, frustrating lawmakers who pressed him in vain to say whether the president had mentioned Russia or otherwise explained his reasons for firing Comey on May 9.

"I'm not able ... to confirm or deny" any conversations with the president, Sessions said.

Sen. Jack Reed, R-R.I., noted that Sessions had effusively praised Comey after he had reopened the FBI investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails 11 days before the election. Reed pressed Sessions to explain why he later decided to recommend Comey's dismissal.

"In retrospect, I think (Comey's conduct) was more egregious than I appreciated at the time," Sessions responded.

Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., at one point accused Sessions of "obstructing" the Senate investigation.

"I am not stonewalling," Sessions insisted, his voice rising. "I am following the historic policies of the Department of Justice" regarding confidential communications with the White House.

Sessions said he had a duty to keep his conversations with Trump private even though Trump has not asserted executive privilege — a sensitive claim that could push the administration into a legal and political collision with Congress and the courts.

"He has not asserted executive privilege to date," Sessions said.

Sessions confirmed Comey's testimony that Trump had met the former FBI director privately in the Oval Office on Feb. 14 after the president had asked everyone else to leave the room.

"Everyone else did depart," Sessions testified. The next day, he said, Comey "expressed concern about being left alone with the president," which is consistent with Comey's account.

In his testimony last week, Comey said he deliberately avoided telling Sessions about what he felt was pressure from Trump to drop an investigation into Michael T. Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser. Sessions said Comey should have simply told Trump he couldn't talk about an ongoing investigation.

"That's the way it's supposed to work, and apparently it did," Sessions said, since Comey acknowledged that Trump never brought the matter up again.

Sessions said that he decided to recuse himself from the Russia investigations because of his role as a senior adviser in the Trump campaign, which he said was a potential conflict. He said, however, that his recusal did not prevent him from urging the president to fire Comey.

cal property tax dollars for school construction, would lead to the privatization of Florida's education system. They also slammed the last-minute appearance of the legislation, which folded together a slate of education bills that had been debated separately.

In recent weeks, though, supporters of the legislation have cranked up their efforts to promote the bill. Some conservative groups and school-choice supporters have worked to get parents of students served by choice programs involved in the fight.

They point to the proposal's more popular components, like teacher bonuses and mandatory recess for elementary students.

Backers also empha-

size that, while charter schools are often operated by private groups, they are public schools that might help turn around troubled school districts.

The result has been a deluge of tens of thousands of messages, for and against the bill, pouring into Scott's office.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the governor's office said it had received 23,440 phone calls, emails, letters or petition signatures backing the legislation. Opponents had generated 22,734 messages against it.

Opponents have dominated in phone calls and emails, while supporters of the bill seem to favor letters, perhaps because of letter-writing campaigns by schools that would be

helped by the legislation.

Those who support the bill concede that they were slower than opponents to organize for the legislation.

Shawn Frost, president of the conservative Florida Coalition of School Board Members, said supporters have now managed to rally parents affected by the legislation.

"What I've seen is parents have been alerted to the fact of what it would mean to them. ... I think a big part has been educating parent groups about the truth of 7069," said Frost, whose group supports the measure.

The LIBRE Initiative, a conservative Hispanic group tied to the Koch brothers, has launched an online email drive, and

sent out mail pieces in English and Spanish, promoting the bill. In a statement last month, the group's coalitions director, Cesar Grajales, said the bill "aims to free Florida's neediest students from this unacceptable education status quo."

"We urge Gov. Scott to quickly sign this bill and remove unnecessary barriers to new charter schools so our students don't have to remain stuck in schools that are failing to provide a quality education," Grajales said.

Those fighting the bill question the outpouring of support, suggesting misinformation and so-called "astroturfing" efforts might be behind some of it. They also highlight reports

that some charter schools have offered extra credit or other benefits for families that sent messages of support for the bill to Scott.

"I think that what we're seeing is sort of a manufactured situation," said Kathleen Oropeza, co-founder of the advocacy group Fund Education Now, which opposes the measure.

And opponents have not backed off. Two Democratic lawmakers issued letters Monday renewing calls for Scott to veto the bill.

"While there are small pockets of good policy hidden within this bill, it is a monstrosity when coupled with the multitude of bad policies that have been included," wrote Sen. Gary Farmer, D-Fort Lauderdale.