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The Florida Times-Union

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Emergency personnel respond to a collapsed pedestrian bridge Thursday at Florida International University in the Miami area. The brand-new pedestrian bridge collapsed onto a highway crushing several vehicles. [ROBERTO KOLTUN/MIAMI HERALD VIA THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Footbridge collapses onto busy Fla. highway

By Adriana Gomez Licon
 The Associated Press

MIAMI — A pedestrian bridge that was under construction collapsed onto a busy Miami highway Thursday, crushing at least eight vehicles under massive slabs of concrete and steel and killing multiple people, authorities said.

Search-and-rescue crews drilled holes into the debris and used dogs to look for survivors. They had to work carefully because part of the structure was still unsafe. At least 10 people were taken to hospitals. The number of fatalities was not immediately known.

The 950-ton (860-metric ton) bridge had been assembled by the side of the highway and moved into place Saturday to great fanfare. The span stretched almost 200 feet (60 meters) to connect Florida International University with the city of Sweetwater. It was expected to open to foot traffic next year.

“We have a national tragedy on our hands,” Sweetwater Mayor Orlando Lopez said.

Jacob Miller, a senior at FIU, was visiting a friend in



Emergency personnel work at the scene of a collapsed pedestrian bridge at Florida International University on Thursday in the Miami area. [(WTVJ NBC6 VIA AP)]

a dorm when he heard sirens and horns honking. He went to a balcony and could see rubble coming down.

“I saw there were multiple cars crushed under the bridge. It was just terrible. I saw some people stopping their cars, trying to get out, trying to assess the situation to see if there is anything they could do to help,” he said.

National Transportation Safety Board chairman Robert Sumwalt III said a

team of specialists was heading to Miami on Thursday night with plans to begin its investigation Friday morning, Florida Gov. Rick Scott said he was headed there as well.

Miami-Dade Police Director Juan Perez said his department’s homicide team would take over the investigation after rescue efforts are complete.

The exact death toll was

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Winn-Dixie parent to close stores and restructure debt

By Steve Patterson
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The parent company of Winn-Dixie and Harveys supermarkets said Thursday it will file for bankruptcy protection.

Southeastern Grocers “will voluntarily file pre-packaged chapter 11 cases to efficiently execute its restructuring,” company spokesman Joe Caldwell said by email.

Pre-packaged filings are used by companies wanting to quickly reset terms for their debts but remain in business.

“It is our goal to work through our financial restructuring as quickly and efficiently as possible and we expect to emerge within the next 90 days,” Caldwell said.

Six stores in North Florida and Southeast Georgia are expected to close as part of the restructuring.

Those are Harveys operations at 3000 Dunn Ave. and 1012 Edgewood Ave. N. in Jacksonville and Winn-Dixie stores at 9866 Baymeadows Road in Jacksonville; 248 Blanding Blvd. in Orange Park; 510 Tebeau St. in Waycross; and 2002 SW 34th St. in Gainesville.

A total of 94 stores throughout the company will close, but

See CLOSE, A6

Council panel will subpoena JEA CEO

By David Bauerlein
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A legal showdown looms between a City Council committee and JEA Chief Executive Officer Paul McElroy after he balked at taking an oath to swear the truth during an appearance Thursday before the committee, prompting the panel to take the rare step of issuing a subpoena that would compel him to answer questions under oath in two weeks.

City Chief Administrative Officer Sam Mousa also refused to swear an oath to tell the truth, but the committee opted against issuing a subpoena compelling him to return for questioning.

The pushback came after city General Counsel Jason Gabriel told the council that it has the power to administer such oaths, but it should “execute that power with deliberation and caution.” Gabriel said if the committee administers the oaths, he is advising any city employees called before the committee to have lawyers with them, just as if they were giving depositions in a legal matter.

The five-member special committee, whose members signaled last week that they would give the oath to all people called in for questioning, said swearing in speakers is justified because the potential sale of JEA is one of the most far-reaching and complicated decisions ever faced by the city.

“We need to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but

the truth,” said Councilman Garrett Dennis.

“This is not your typical policy matter,” Councilman Danny Becton said.

McElroy said he wants to provide information to the committee but based on Gabriel’s advice, he would not testify under oath “at this time.”

The oath requires speakers to speak truthfully or face perjury charges. Perjury is a third-degree felony punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$5,000 fine.

McElroy said he can understand how people might react negatively to his decision against taking the oath, but he said the committee’s decision to administer the oath “was sprung on us at the last minute.” He said he needs time to sit down with attorneys and be prepared.

“This has been a dramatic conversation back and forth, a lot of emotion, a lot of misconceptions and a lot of pressure,” he said of the debate so far surrounding whether the city should put JEA up for sale.

Gabriel said the City Council has administered oaths during quasi-judicial proceedings such as zoning matters where the meetings create a record that can later be entered into the court system. Gabriel said he did not know of any time in 50 years when City Council had administered oaths during meetings to hash out policy decisions such as whether the city should sell JEA.

See JEA, A6

Duval board says state budget will cut money for education

Increased safety costs will take from other areas; Duval wants special session

By Denise Smith Amos
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Even though the state budget proposal on Gov. Rick Scott’s desk includes millions of dollars of increased education funding, Duval County school leaders are asking Scott to veto it.

Duval officials said Thursday that the proposed budget would send the district \$9.9 million more this year than last year, including \$2.9 million earmarked for new mental health services and about \$4 million for “safe schools” efforts, including hiring more police officers.

But district officials say they need much more.

For instance, it would cost Duval \$14.3 million a year to hire and equip enough police officers to cover all Duval public schools and \$18.7 million if charter schools are included. Every year after, the officers would cost \$8.7 million a year for the district or \$11.2 million including charter schools, said Tracy Pearce, chief of marketing and public

relations for the district.

School Board members and district officials are distributing fliers and contacting parents this week, asking them to lobby the governor to call for a special legislative session, to get state representatives and senators to plug in enough money so that districts like Duval cover their bills next year and comply with new safety and mental health requirements.

The budget proposal contains increases in public school funding averaging \$101.50 per student for the average district. Nearly all of that increase can only be used for safety and mental health efforts, part of a pledge from lawmakers after the fatal school shooting in Parkland last month.

But only a fraction of that increase — an average of 47 cents per student — will be available for districts’ other operating costs, such as employee raises, insurance and utility rate increases. For Duval County schools, that 0.01 percent increase means only \$60,505.50 more to spend than last year, said Superintendent Patricia Willis.

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CLOSE

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582 will continue to operate. "This course of action enables us to continue writing the story for our company and our iconic, heritage banners in the Southeast," CEO Anthony Hucker said in a written statement. Thursday's announcement actually mentioned plans to remake many stores during a

three-year overhaul of the chain. The change "will create stunning, remodeled stores in a significant portion of our footprint," a release from the company said. "This revitalization will also provide our customers with fresh, new concepts and products to cater to the local tastes and needs of the neighborhoods we serve." Changes in the grocery industry have strained Winn-Dixie for years and forced the chain to seek new niches where it could prosper. Winn-Dixie had

gone through its own Chapter 11 process as a struggling regional giant in the mid-2000s. Bi-Lo Holdings, whose chain name is now part of Southeastern Grocers, announced it was buying Winn-Dixie in late 2011. A re-branding of some Jacksonville stores as Harveys began in 2016. Federal bankruptcy dockets contained no details Thursday afternoon about the restructuring plan.

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The parent company of Winn-Dixie supermarkets announced plans to file for bankruptcy Thursday. [THE TIMES-UNION, FILE]

JEA

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But that has happened before. In 2009, the City Council swore in the entire audience in council chambers during a meeting to discuss a controversial contract for Trail Ridge Landfill. Of at least nine people who were expected to testify under oath, only two ended up testifying. One of those was Alan Mosley, the city's chief administrative officer at that time. Mousa, who now fills that post for the city, had come to the Thursday meeting to talk about the administration's plans for selecting a financial advisor on issues related to privatization of city-owned assets. The agenda for the meeting showed Mousa and McElroy would make their appearances, and then at the end of meeting, the committee would discuss a legal memo prepared by Gabriel's office about subpoenas and oaths. But Dennis said the council needs to follow through on the previous week's determination

to issue oaths. Other council members said it was not personal, but the committee needs to apply that standard across the board, starting with Mousa and McElroy. City Councilman Matt Schellenberg, who is not a committee member but is among the council members sitting in on the meetings, said the oaths would backfire on the committee's mission because cause people would give answers "as broad as possible" to avoid the risk of legal jeopardy. He questioned who would pay for attorneys representing the speakers during their appearances. Mousa said that in three decades in City Hall, he had spoken numerous times to City Council. "At no time have I ever not told the truth," Mousa said told the council members. After Mousa left the council chambers, city spokeswoman Marsha Oliver noted that council members all said they had trust in Mousa. "Certainly, he has earned the credibility," Oliver said. She said she would not speculate on whether Mousa would

speaking to the council committee at a later date with a lawyer to advise him. "All I can say is Mr. Mousa came down to the meeting, certainly to be informative and to be a participant in this as requested," she said. "As Mr. Gabriel said to him, he did not recommend that he or anyone stand there under oath without the presence of a lawyer." Valerie Gutierrez, business manager of the union representing JEA linemen, told council it's troubling neither McElroy nor Mousa was willing to take the oath. "It's sad that Sam Mousa and our CEO Paul McElroy are refusing to take the oath because it speaks volumes, not just to the community but to the employees," she said. In other business, the council committee discussed plans to hire an expert in the utility industry to help guide the committee. The Jessie Ball duPont Fund, based in Jacksonville, has offered to underwrite the cost of the expert.

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COLLAPSES

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unclear. Florida Highway Patrol Lt. Alejandro Camacho told CBS News that there were "several fatalities." Carlie Waibel, a spokeswoman for Sen. Bill Nelson, said local officials told Nelson that people had died, but a final number had not been confirmed. An accelerated construction method was supposed to reduce risks to workers and pedestrians and minimize traffic disruption, the university said. Renderings showed a tall, off-center tower with cables attached to the walkway to support it. When the bridge collapsed, the main tower had not yet been installed, and it was unclear what the builders were using as temporary supports. Robert Bea, a professor of engineering and construction management at the University of California, Berkeley, said it was too early to know exactly what happened, but the decision to use what the bridge builders called an "innovative installation" was risky, especially because the bridge spanned a heavily traveled thoroughfare. "Innovations take a design firm into an area where they don't have applicable experience, and then we have another unexpected failure on our hands," Bea said after reviewing the bridge's design and photos of the collapse. Sweetwater police Detective Juan Llera was in a nearby meeting when the bridge collapsed. "I heard a 'boom' like a bomb had exploded," he said. "At first I thought it was a terrorist attack." He said he saw three construction workers who had been injured. One had a head injury and was passing in and out of consciousness, another one had a leg injury and the third was lying on the street unconscious. He started performing CPR on him. "We were able to keep him alive to send him to the hospital," Llera said. Kendall Regional Medical Center received 10 injured people. Of those, two were in "extremely critical" condition and the other eight were stable with injuries such as broken bones, bruises and abrasions, said Dr. Mark McKenney, the hospital's director of general surgery. Of the two more serious cases, one arrived in cardiac arrest but was revived. The other had a serious brain injury, McKenney said. The main companies behind the \$14.2 million

construction project have faced questions about their past work, and one was fined in 2012 when a 90-ton (80-metric ton) section of a bridge collapsed in Virginia. Munilla Construction Management, or MCM, the Miami-based construction management firm that won the bridge contract, took its website down Thursday. But an archived version featured a news release touting the project with FIGG Bridge Engineers, a Tallahassee firm. MCM said on Twitter that it was "a family business and we are all devastated and doing everything we can to assist. We will conduct a full investigation to determine exactly what went wrong and will cooperate with investigators on scene in every way." FIGG said in a statement, "In our 40-year history, nothing like this has ever happened before." But FIGG was fined in 2012 after a 90-ton (80-metric ton) section of a bridge it was building in Virginia crashed onto railroad tracks below, causing minor injuries to several workers. The citation from the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry said FIGG did not properly inspect a girder and had not obtained written consent from its manufacturer before modifying it, according to a story in The Virginian-Pilot. Court documents show that MCM was accused of substandard work in a lawsuit filed earlier this month. The suit said a worker at Fort Lauderdale International Airport, where the company is working on an expansion, was injured when a makeshift MCM-built bridge collapsed under his weight. The suit accused the company of employing "incompetent, inexperienced, unskilled or careless employees" at the job site. A review of Occupational Safety and Health Administration records shows that MCM has been fined for 11 safety violations in the past five years. The fines totaling more than \$50,000 arose from complaints about unsafe trenches, cement dust and other problems at its Florida work sites. Florida International University is the second largest university in the state, with 55,000 students, most of whom live off-campus. The bridge was supposed to be a safe way to cross a busy highway. A university student was killed in August while crossing the road that the bridge was supposed to span.

BUDGET

From Page A1

"This amount does not even cover our average teacher's salary plus benefits," Willis wrote in a letter to state leaders. "A 47-cent per-student increase actually represents a loss of funding to Duval schools." Utility, health, property insurance and other business costs are rising, she said; this budget jeopardizes funding for important student programs. Add to that a change in the state's formula for per-student allocations. The state now pays large districts less per student and smaller districts more per student than under the old version of the formula. Duval stands to receive \$69.31 per student next year, far below the statewide average of \$101.50 per student, Willis said. Most of the state's 10 largest districts have complained about the budget. Florida laws and rules dictate how most education dollars are spent, including how much must be spent on books and materials and how much must go to technology. This year most of the new money is earmarked for safety upgrades of buildings, increased training for armed school staff, adding law enforcement officers to schools and expanding mental health services. That doesn't leave enough for normal, inflationary increases or for regular raises for employees, Willis said.

Since there also won't be enough to pay for a school resource officer at all district schools, as Florida's new law requires, the district will have to make up for whatever state funding doesn't cover, she said. Currently, Duval employs school resource officers at all middle and high schools, its K-8 buildings and its alternative schools. With the new law, it will have to hire officers for its 101 elementary and kindergarten-to-sixth grade buildings, said Rebecca Couch, a board member. Critics say the state has allocated \$162 million in "safe schools" money, including \$97 million for law enforcement officers. But districts need about 1,550 more officers to cover every school, costing an estimated \$115 million or more, based on a survey by the Florida Department of Education and on average personnel costs for sheriff's deputies. Districts are expected to use their other funding to pay the difference. "While we appreciate the increase in school safety funding, Duval's share will not be enough to provide a school resource officer at each school," Willis said. "We need those funds for sworn officers protecting our schools." A majority of Duval's board has indicated they would oppose arming other school employees, such as principals or maintenance employees, even though the state has allocated \$67 million to train them to carry a gun. Several board members said they worry someone will be injured

or killed and about the legal liability. It is unclear where the district will cut to make up for the money shortfall. Terrie Brady, Duval Teachers United president, said she fears there will be less money for curriculum, teacher mentoring and other resources schools need. This reaction seems ungrateful to legislative leaders who said they scrambled to add \$400 million dollars more than originally proposed to the budget. Scott's office Thursday issued a statement highlighting the extra dollars. "In this year's budget, K-12 public schools are provided hundreds of millions of dollars and the flexibility needed to make each school safer while still increasing Florida's per-pupil funding to a record high," said McKinley Lewis, Scott's deputy communications director. "The governor has been clear — the number one priority right now is making our schools safer, and he's glad that the Legislature provided funding for that specific reason." Lewis noted that Scott originally called for a lot more — \$152 per-student — in funding increases, but the state senate called for a \$45.20 per-student cut and the House wanted only a \$75.20 per-student raise. In total, statewide per-pupil funding will rise to a record \$7,408 per-pupil, Lewis said. That's several thousand below the national average of \$12,975 per student. Scott has until March 29 to sign the budget.

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