



REASON

Legislature pulled a ‘bait and switch’ on voter-approved surtax revenue



Your Turn
Name Here
Guest columnist

Accolades to Steve Patterson for his informative May 16 article, titled “Duval schools set community meetings.” These meetings are to obtain public input on consultant Scott Leopold’s draft report recommending school closures.

Leopold was hired by Duval County Public Schools at a cost exceeding \$1 million to solve a \$1.4 billion budget shortfall under the 2019 Master Facilities Plan. This plan formed the basis of a sales tax referendum overwhelmingly approved by voters in 2020. The School Board contends the present shortfall is due to higher building costs, loss of COVID relief funds and reduced student enrollment.

Another significant cause of the present deficit is millions of tax dollars diverted from public schools by Florida legislative policies. Tax revenues intended for public schools now fund charter schools and vouchers as well. Unbeknownst to most citizens, from 2020 to 2023 a legislative “bait and switch” occurred.

The School Board enacted the Master Facilities Plan — with a budget of \$1.91 billion — in July 2019. Its purpose was to address aging school buildings, remove portable classrooms, create safe spaces and resolve more than \$1 billion in deferred facility maintenance over the next 15 years. A resolution passed on Nov. 5, 2019, and the half-penny sales tax was approved by voter referendum in 2020.

Inflation, the end of COVID funds, legislation funding charter schools with previously exclusive public school tax dollars and the funding of school vouchers ensued. In 2020, the Florida Legislature started sharing this half-penny sales tax with charter schools on a per student basis — not what citizens intended.

The detrimental effect of this “revenue sharing” reduced the tax dollars that were initially meant for failing inner-city schools, as well as highly rated neighborhood schools.

In 2023, another law (Florida Statute 1013.62) mandated an annual increased percentage of public tax revenues allocated to charter schools in proportion to their enrollment. This is to be used toward procurement of land and construction of facilities, among other related expenditures.

This further directed more public money to enrich private enterprise each year: from 20% of tax revenues in 2023-2024 to 60% in 2024-2025; to 80% in 2026-2027; and to an unconscionable 100% in 2027.

We have been lulled into a false sense of security based on our School Board’s 2019 plan and the 2020 vote for increased taxes to fund our public schools. We woke up in April 2024 to the School Board consultant’s call for closures and consolidation of some of our most successful, “A”-rated, neighborhood schools.

This awakened the sleeping lion, which roars by posting signs to “Save Atlantic Beach Elementary School” and “No to school closures” throughout Atlantic Beach. We also appear en masse at public hearings to oppose school closures. The city of Atlantic Beach even enacted a resolution to save our sole neighborhood public school.

School Board members are flooded with letters from parents and students alike to save their neighborhood schools. Official public records requests are promulgated, yet such roars alone are insufficient to counter forces that seek to destroy our traditional public school system.

Through the years, and especially

over the past four years in Florida, “school choice” has morphed into a system that saps the lifeblood from traditional public school systems, a result that most taxpayers never intended. Citizens are successfully fighting back in other areas, such as Broward and Brevard counties; we must do the same in Duval County.

Our public schools’ survival is at grave risk. We must clearly send the message to our School Board and Tallahassee that we will not tolerate the destruction of our longstanding public schools by massive school closures or consolidations. This further reduces public school enrollment and enriches a largely unregulated privatized system, contrary to Florida’s state constitution.

A paradigm shift is required, redirecting the narrative away from evaluating the viability of the consultant’s report. Instead, the 2019 plan must be revisited and financially updated. Voters chose to fund this plan with increased sales tax. We must not tolerate a dual-competing educational system.

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This guest column is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Times-Union. We welcome a diversity of opinions.



Supporters are adorned in pink T-shirts to support Atlantic Beach Elementary on May 21 at Fletcher High School in Neptune Beach. The Duval County school district gathered at Fletcher in the first of six meetings to hear public comments on a proposal to close or consolidate dozens of schools. COREY PERRINE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

Citizens’ preferences carry no weight with Jacksonville City Council



Your Turn
J. Logan Cross
Guest columnist

The Jacksonville City Council recently approved a proposal to place a self-storage facility at a prominent intersection in the urban core. This was a revealing decision and sounded an alarm residents should heed. It revealed that a council member majority, and by extension the entire council, is untethered to rules and practices that have guided them for years.

It also showed that our City Council has an apparent lust for self-storage facilities.

The effort to place a self-storage facility at the intersection of Prudential Drive and Hendricks Avenue was a multi-year effort with differing versions of the facility proposed at each stage. Throughout this process, citizens were vocal in their opposition, but to no avail. Approval of the self-storage facility confirmed citizen preferences carry no weight with most council members.

Had citizen preferences carried weight, the campaign to place a self-storage at the prominent intersection would have ended long ago.

The Downtown Investment Authority and the Downtown Development Review Board staff both asserted self-storage was inappropriate inside the

See COUNCIL, Page 4C

Hemp-derived THC a hole in Florida’s intoxicating substance regulation

Your Turn
Kathleen Roberts
Guest columnist

Here in Florida, we have common sense guidelines that prevent our state’s kids and teens from accessing drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol cannot be marketed to children and hard liquor can’t be sold at gas stations or convenience stores. To access our state’s medical marijuana program, patients must be diagnosed with a qualifying medical condition by a doctor and can only access marijuana at one of the state’s 627 licensed dispensaries.

These laws were passed to keep our communities safe. Unfortunately,

See THC, Page 4C



Would your child know this isn’t candy? Cases involving children and accidental ingestion of Delta-8 THC, a highly intoxicating cannabinoid derivative, have been on the rise. PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY COALITION ALLIANCE