

The Ledger editorial page

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EDITORIALS

LEDGER OPINIONS

[LAKELAND POLICE SCANDALS]

Government In The Dark

When Lakeland City Manager Doug Thomas hired Tampa PR firm Tucker/Hall in July, a period began in which not only the residents of Lakeland were unaware of an expensive-and-powerful process below the surface at City Hall, but the six city commissioners were not informed about developments. The operation was further obfuscated by using the Lakeland office of the private GrayRobinson law firm as an intermediary to hire Tucker/Hall.

Thomas did not take the hiring to a City Commission meeting for approval. The expense — which now stands at \$134,624 — exceeded \$25,000, the amount by city practice at which the city manager must seek commission approval.

Instead, Thomas contacted the mayor and six commissioners individually. He held one-on-one conversations with them in which he sought their approval for the action he was taking.

The Florida Government-in-the-Sunshine Law requires decisions of boards such as the City Commission to be made together in a public meeting, for which public notice has been given, and for which minutes will be recorded promptly and made public.

None of these requirements was met. Instead, the responses from the mayor and six commissioners were elicited one-by-one by Thomas.

In an after-the-fact abuse, Thomas told commissioners that they did not cast votes in their one-on-one conversations with him but rather “endorsed his decision,” as City Commissioner Don Selvage explained in Monday’s commission meeting. Nonetheless, Selvage said twice that he voted via Thomas to hire Tucker/Hall.

OUTSIDE AUTHORITY

Because the Lakeland City Commission has taken no action against Thomas and has not taken action to prevent recurrence, an outside authority should investigate.

The State Attorney’s Office, either through examination by its investigators or through a grand jury, is the appropriate agency.

It may be that Lakeland’s commissioners have not taken action because they were complicit — after all, it takes two or more to violate the Sunshine Law — but action to enforce this most important of governmental laws is needed.

The state of Florida must not allow the city of Lakeland to hide its decision-making from the residents of the city — or any other interested person.

It was not just the PR-firm hiring that turned government dark in Lakeland City Hall, it was a comprehensive lack of communication by administrative officials with elected officials.

In the Monday commission meeting, after agreeing with a comment from Commissioner Edie Yates that the hiring of Tucker/Hall was necessary — given lawsuits expected as a result of the Lakeland Police Department sex scandal in which 10 on-duty officers engaged in sexual acts and sexually suggestive behavior, and more than 20 did so in total — Selvage described the city administration’s curtain of darkness and the difficulty it caused.

‘MARGINALIZED’

“The decision was made to not handle it in the sunshine. It was put under GrayRobinson under the legal-fee issue, which is not on the sunshine. I checked all three of the legal-fee reports since July — the quarterly reports put out by our city attorney. Every one of them, fees were red-light litigation and eminent domain,” Selvage said.

“Not once in those three reports was the name Tucker/Hall mentioned,” he said.

“Here’s where I have a problem with how we handled it. We were marginalized — the commission. The six commissioners were also out there,” Selvage said.

“I’m not here to say to reprimand or punish the city manager,” Selvage said, “but I got to tell you, this was not handled right, as far as I’m concerned. We could have handled it better and we did not.”

Commissioner Justin Troller said: “Don, this is no surprise. We’ve been kept in the dark for the past four years on a bunch of issues.”

“I’m glad under this new leadership we will be able to be part of the solution,” Troller said, in reference to Howard Wiggs becoming mayor this year after defeating former Mayor Gow Fields in a November election. Fields was mayor for four years.

Selvage is correct that “this was not handled right.”

State Attorney Jerry Hill should make sure that the wrong of bypassing the Florida Government-in-the-Sunshine Law is righted.



LISA BENSON | SYNDICATED CARTOONIST

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Obamacare Is Working Despite Republicans' Efforts to Stop It

Multitudes of people are suffering because 23 Republican states, including Florida, rejected federal Medicaid expansion money to offset premiums of the Affordable Care Act.

Their goal is to destroy ACA out of political spite, as witnessed by Congressional Republicans' filing of 50 bids to repeal the act to the tune of \$72 million. They do not care one iota about the people.

President Barack Obama compromised with Republicans who were greatly opposed to single-payer, which would have been far superior to the insurance-dominated version we have now.

The states were allowed to opt out of Medicaid expansion and run their own marketplace exchange. Just a few states are providing alternatives.

This has left millions with no choice but to go to the federal marketplace, which greatly contributed to the crashing of the website. The states that accepted the expansion and are running their own websites are operating smoothly.

The president believed his compromise would be met with cooperation by the insurance companies, which were allowed to continue business as usual.

Instead, they raised premiums and did not bring their junk policies up to compliance, as required by ACA law.

Thus, we saw many policies canceled and people lost their doctors.

Obama did not lie.

He expected the best out of people.

Instead, they created problems for consumers and blamed it on Obamacare.

Gov. Rick Scott announced his support of the expansion, knowing full well that House Speaker Will W. Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, and the Legislature would reject it. It was a transparent political move toward reelection.

Eight million people nationally have registered for the Affordable Care Act, exceeding the goal by 1 million.

Vote for a Democrat for governor in November so we can make health care affordable for all.

DEBRA STRICKLAND
Polk City

Blue Angels Show

In reference to Jim Phillips' recent letter ["Cut Blue Angels from Show," April 11], I lived due south of the airport for 18 years. It's west of Lakeland.

I lived in Oakview Estates. I learned, after my first fly-in, to take vacation at that time.

A lounge chair and a cooler of beer made this the best week of the year. Jet jockeys don't crash F-18s unless they are committing suicide.

COLUMNIST OPINIONS

Time to Respect Substitute Teachers

By RANDY JURADO ERTL
McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Substitute teachers deserve respect. Let me tell you, it takes courage and commitment to be a substitute teacher.

We have to deal not just with students who are messing around but also with students who are screaming at us or throwing objects at us.

Sometimes, we have to contend with the threat or the reality of being assaulted by a student.

It is no piece of cake.

On top of that, it takes years of teaching experience to learn certain classroom-management and teaching skills. You have to be an expert in most subject fields because you may be assigned a math, science, English or even physical education class on short notice.

I doubt Phillips is old enough to remember the Korean War.

I grew up in the St. Louis area during the 1950s. Sonic booms were an everyday occurrence, and I fell asleep at night to the sound of machine gun fire.

Sorry if three hours of jet engines bothers you or scares you, but to me this is the music of freedom.

DENNIS SULLIVAN
Lakeland

FCAT vs. Religious Week

What is wrong with the elected officials in this state?

During the week observing Passover and Holy Week — two specific times of high holiness for Jews and Christians — our students and teachers are rather pulled to the new god: the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Then we wonder why things in our schools and country are getting so bad.

This country was founded on the Judeo-Christian ethic, and when a country is dedicated in that fashion, as this one was, to move away from that is to bring a curse on the country.

God is supreme, whether we believe in him or not, and he can care less for our “political correctness” in ignoring him and his blessing.

Shame on this state for the worship of the FCAT god.

Our teachers, students and all of us belong in our churches and synagogues to worship and remember and call for needed guidance and blessing upon this sick nation.

What are we teaching our children? What are we calling upon this nation?

This insult levied at the God who has been so good to this nation is truly an abomination and disgrace.

God save us from our stupidity.

JIM BRESKY
Teacher
Winter Haven

WRITE TO US

The Ledger welcomes letters for publication in the Voice of the People Column. Only original letters written directly to The Ledger will be considered, and preference is given to discussion of contemporary issues. Volume precludes acknowledgment or return of unpublished letters. All letters are subject to editing for clarity, length, taste and libel. Letters should be signed and contain the writer's full name, address and telephone number. Anonymity is granted only under unusual circumstances. Letters should be kept to 300 words or less, and brevity is encouraged.

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COLUMNIST OPINIONS



David Brooks

THE NEW YORK TIMES

www.nytimes.com/brooks

Upper-Class Rivalry at Work In Piketty's Book

Many people join the political left driven by a concern for the poor. But, over the past several years, the Democratic Party has talked much more about the middle class than the poor. Meanwhile, progressive political movements like Occupy Wall Street directed their fervor at the top 1 percent. Progressive movies and books have focused their attention on conspiracy and oligarchy at the top, not “Grapes of Wrath” or “How the Other Half Lives” stories at the bottom.

This is natural. The modern left is led by smart professionals — academics, activists, people in the news media, the arts and so on — who tend to live in and around coastal cities.

If you are a young professional in a major city, you experience inequality firsthand. But the inequality you experience most acutely is not inequality down, toward the poor. It's inequality up, toward the rich.

You go to fundraisers or school functions and there are always hedge fund managers and private-equity people around. You get more attention than them at parties, but your whole apartment could fit in their dining room.

You struggle with tuition, but their kids go off on ski weekends. You wait in line at the post office, but they have staff to do it for them.

You see firsthand the explosion of

Well, of course, this book is going to set off a fervor that some have likened to Beatlemania.

wealth at the tippy-top. It really doesn't help that you have to spend your days kissing up to the oligarchs and their foundations to finance your research, exhibition or favorite cause.

The situation is ripe for the sort of class conflict that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu used to describe: pitting those who are rich in cultural capital against those who are rich in financial capital.

And into this fray wanders Thomas Piketty. His book “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” argues that the real driver of inequality is not primarily differences in human capital. It's differences in financial capital.

Inequality is not driven by young hip professionals who arm their kids with every advantage and get them into competitive colleges.

It's driven by hedge fund oligarchs. Well, of course, this book is going to set off a fervor that some have likened to Beatlemania.

The book is very good and interesting, but it has pretty obvious weaknesses. Though economists are really not good at predicting the future, Piketty makes a series of educated guesses about the next century.

Piketty predicts that growth will be low for a century, though there seems to be a lot of innovation around. He predicts that the return on capital will be high, though there could be diminishing returns as the supply increases.

He predicts that family fortunes will concentrate, though big ones in the past have tended to dissipate and families like the Gateses give a lot away. Human beings are generally treated in aggregate terms, without much discussion of individual choice.

But those self-acknowledged weaknesses are overlooked. And his policy agenda is perfectly suited to his market audience.

The problem with those who stress financial-capital inequality over human capital inequality is that up until now they have described a big problem but they have no big proposal to address it.

Now they do: a global wealth tax. Piketty proposes that all the governments in the world, or at least the big ones, get together, find all the major wealth in the world and then tax capital progressively.

Piketty wouldn't raise taxes on income, which thriving professionals have a lot of; he would tax investment capital, which they don't have enough of.

The reaction to Piketty is an amazing cultural phenomenon.

But it says more about class rivalry within the educated classes than it does about how to really expand opportunity.

Of course, this perspective could just be my own prejudice.

When it comes to cultural analysis, I, like Piketty, am quasi-Marxist.

