



## Carmage Walls Commentary Prize

### 2018 Entry Form

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**What is the subject/title of the entry?**

Dark clouds over Tallahassee

**Date(s) of publication?**

6/3/2017

8/16/2017

8/25/2017

9/28/2017

10/24/2017

11/17/2017

**Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation?** Under

**Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)**

**BACKGROUND:** In 2017, the capital city, which was already soul searching for its brand identity, got hit by a curveball. A dark cloud descended on the city amid an ongoing FBI investigation into public corruption. Days before subpoenas dropped on City Hall, the Publisher and President Skip Foster offered a way forward in a long-form editorial assessing Tallahassee's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. As our investigative team revealed troubling details that connected the highest levels of city government to the criminal probe, Foster held officials accountable and demanded transparency in a series of editorials.

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/06/03/our-opinion-brand-new-day->

[tallahassee/361966001/](https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/2017/08/16/foster-truth-clear-cloud-fbi-investigation/572349001/)

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/2017/08/16/foster-truth-clear-cloud-fbi-investigation/572349001/>

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/08/25/our-opinion-simple-yes-no-could-help-clear-fbi-clouds-mayor-andrew-gillum/602801001/>

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/09/28/our-opinion-citys-obstruction-public-information/714406001/>

<http://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/10/24/our-opinion-crisis-confidence-our-city-government/796804001/>

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/11/17/our-opinion-city-manager-paid-limbo-not-tenable/873624001/>

**RESULTS:** The editorials paved the way for [a public records lawsuit filed by the Democrat](#). Knowing that they had broken the law when the city manager deleted the text message, the city immediately acted to settle the lawsuit and vowed more transparency around text messages. [The settlement was hailed as landmark](#) by first amendment advocates and was profiled [by the Poynter Institute](#) and [Editor and Publisher](#). The city's text messaging policy is now [being used as a model around Florida](#). Other victories that followed the editorials:

- We were pretty darn stunned when the City handed us a \$22,000 bill for email records they had already compiled for the FBI. [The city reversed course after a combination of some great journalism](#) and the editorials above to rally the community.
- As part of the settlement, the city will no longer screen and remove emails or texts that they deem to be private. That insidious policy enabled records keepers to skim records off the top that were related to campaigns or other matters that officials deemed to be non-city business.



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# Zing!

READERS' OPINIONS  
STATED SUCCINCTLY

Tallahassee, we are on our own with care of the environment. At least, carry reusable bags in your car for groceries!

It is always a great way to start the day when you open the paper and see one of your Zing!s published.

The mutual aid agreement between city and county law enforcement agencies is the best thing that could have happened. As long as they all understand how it works.

Trump better hope Mar-a-Lago floats.

I hope all the whining liberals understand they are free to reduce their own carbon footprint. I suspect it's another case of wanting others to make the sacrifices.

Can Macron please be our president, too?

Pulling out of the Paris Accord hurts the economy as well as the environment, and helps no one. Well, maybe Russian oil millionaires...

What will the media do when the Russia hoax finally vaporizes? Start criticizing Trump for not trimming his nose hairs?

If God meant for us to eat raw fish, he would not have given us fire.

With allies like Merkel and Macron, who needs enemies?

Dear Europe: Please accept our apologies for the ineptness currently in our country's highest office. Sincerely, the Majority.

It appears that, unlike Mussolini, Trump won't even be able to get the trains to run on time.

Interesting article in Friday's Democrat about augmented reality with the new iPhone. In the '60s and '70s we didn't have iPhones, but we managed some pretty good reality augmentation without them.

Maybe the National Hurricane Center should begin naming Trump's Twitter storms.

The plan to Make America Great Again starts with ignoring history, eschewing science, reversing progress, and starting over with a "good-ole-comrade" paradigm.

We have enough problems in America, so it's OK to make America first, then consider wisely what tax dollars you are going to give away to help others.

Oh, no. Got my Zing! Now I'm hooked again.

You'll never escape. Just give in. Visit [www.tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your Zing! and check out the Zing! blog at [Tallahassee.com](http://Tallahassee.com).

## OUR OPINION



An aerial view of Tallahassee.

DEMOCRAT FILES

# A brand new day in Tallahassee?

It's time for hyper-politicized city to consider consolidation and step outside the looming shadow cast by the Capitol

*"A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well." - Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon*

**S**o, you want to (re)brand your city, do you? OK, we're in. But if you think this is an exercise in creating logos, slogans and snappy creatives, you've come to the wrong place.

Whether Tallahassee's brand needs a tweak, an enhancement or a complete overhaul, the process should be deliberative, transparent and, well, difficult.

It should reflect three key constituents – residents, visitors and business.

And it should be driven by what makes us unique – what sets Tallahassee apart?

Anybody who plops down at a table and says: "THIS is what our brand should be!" is missing out on the tidal nature of formulating these types of things. The magic is in the collaboration. This is not about winning a slogan contest or some fictional battle of best ideas – it's about laying out threads and then seeing how they tie together.

To that end, this tractate is an effort not at solving the puzzle, but of assembling some of the pieces that would constitute Tallahassee's brand – or at least contribute to it.

Some of these are reflections of our current state; others are recommendations for future conditions.

### 1. It's time to create and demand a culture of honesty

Too many are only willing to talk about Tallahassee in terms that fit their agenda.

*The entire city is corrupt and evil.*

OR  
*This is an A-plus city.*

It's time for the demonizers and glorifiers to step aside.

We need a brutally honest assessment of our city.

The list of positive attributes is long – small town feel; everything that comes with being a three-college town; amazing natural resources that bring endless recreational opportunities; proximity to the coast; capital of the state; and the list goes on.

But there are also giant, persistent problems – one of the worst crime rates in the state; too many people in poverty, leading to economic segregation; a "good old boy" network that often brings a dark-cloud to community decision-making and leads to a lack of confi-



The Florida Capitol

JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT

dence in ethical practices; battles over how and even if Tallahassee should grow.

There should be immense pride in the positives and a weariness over the negatives, many of which have been on that list for far too long.

But mainly there should be a willingness to discuss and assess these strengths and weaknesses fairly and honestly.

### 2. It's time to shed the moniker "government town."

There are 50 state capitals in the United States. Not all of them have succumbed to the idea that because the state workforce is based in a state capital, the city's destiny is sealed.

Is Austin, Texas, a "government town?" Nashville? Raleigh? From the Research Triangle to Music City to Austin's eclectic arts and outdoors identity, these Southern state capitals (and many others) have stepped out of the shadow of their Capitol domes and established new brands.

Sure, they all have legislators, lobbyists, lawyers and the like. But the economic base is diversified. The brand is far from government-centric.

None of that should diminish the important role government plays in that market nor tarnish the contribution of those who enter into public service.

But being a "government town" simply isn't a brand that travels.

### 3. It's time to look – seriously, soberly and thoroughly – at consolidating government

For us, this isn't mainly about efficiency (although that should be

created) or saving money (although that should happen as well).

This is directly related to the point above.

This town is hyper-politicized. Part of the reason government has dominated Tallahassee's brand is that we have all let it happen. Perhaps it is just trickle down from the state legislature, but a city this size shouldn't have so many career local politicians, local political consultants and the like.

This also goes to the issue of a culture of honesty and transparency – the more layers of local government, the more likely there is to be posturing and spin when it comes to the city's image.

This leads to the ultimate "brand trap," according to Greg Clark, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program, who studies community brands. In a Wall Street Journal interview last year, Clark said: "The worst situation is when your product is worse than your image."

If Tallahassee can't solve its crime problem, there isn't a catchy slogan in the world that's going to overcome that reality.

Maybe a unified countywide police force and the consolidation of other city and county services won't solve the problem. Maybe it will. But at the least, it will go a long way toward de-politicizing our system and surely that's a good thing in the long run.

### 4. On the other hand, it's time for the private sector to put on its big boy pants

There is a legacy of private sec-

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# Truth will clear the cloud of FBI investigation



**Skip Foster**  
PUBLISHER

The Summer of 2017. It has been marked by dark clouds. Lightning strikes. Electricity. Literally, it has rained almost every day.

Figuratively, storm clouds of an FBI investigation loom large. Everyone seems to be bracing for a monsoon of truth.

The Tallahassee Democrat is committed to this community and its well-being — now and for the future. That's been our proud history: tracking a large part of Tallahassee's history by reporting the news, good and bad, even when it's unsettling or unpleasant. It's what we do.

So, let's talk about this federal probe and how the newspaper has covered it.

We report the news — based on the facts available to us and others that we uncover by our aggressive but fair reporting. By doing that on this continuing saga, we have found ourselves taking arrows from both the political left and the right. I think that likely reflects we're doing this job as we're supposed to do it. We can handle it — and while we welcome comments and criticisms, responsibly conveyed, it will not deter, delay or distract us from doing our job as we believe it should be done.

While some think we are "over covering" the FBI corruption investigation and others think we haven't done enough, we think we're doing our job as professionals.

We've assigned two ace reporters, Jeff Burlew and Jeff Schweers (yes, we call them "the Jeffs" in the office), to this story, nonstop. Our oversight editors, William Hatfield and Jennifer Portman, are among the best and brightest in our industry anywhere, too.

And while generating online traffic and readership is not something for which we apologize, I believe we have eschewed the sensational and are defaulting to a responsible approach to this story that must be covered.

There's a good chance that some of the people named in the subpoenas will never be indicted. That makes us especially attentive to our reporting and editing, ensuring that what we publish meets our highest bar of relevance and accuracy.

On the other hand, the aggressiveness of our reporting should be commensurate with revealing any breach of the sacred trust of those serving in a government funded by and for taxpayers.

And I hasten to add this: There is a lot — I mean A LOT — of information we have that clears a high bar, but not quite the highest bar that we have set for ourselves. We have chosen not to publish such information in an effort to err on the side of truth, fairness and accuracy.

For all of our neighbors who worry about how this scandal, publicity about it and the ultimate still-elusive final truth are only serving to drag down the city's image, here and elsewhere, and hurting our ability to pro-



USA TODAY cover on Aug. 16

WILLIAM HATFIELD/DEMOCRAT

# Zing!

READERS' OPINIONS STATED SUCCINCTLY

Looks like next year's re-enactment at Natural Bridge will be a punt.

Should TLH consider changing Apalachee Parkway to Apalachee Speedway?

Trump had a chance to help heal the wound but instead poured salt in it.

Corcoran the anti-corruption crusader. Right. He's just mad all that CRA graft didn't pass through his dirty little paws.

Yup! Destroy historical statues and artifacts just like the Taliban and ISIS do. Good job, liberals.

The president has compared the Confederate statues to those of Washington and Jefferson. I must have missed class the day they talked about Washington and Jefferson being traitors to the United States.

John Thrasher is exhibiting true moral leadership. Maybe President Trump could come observe him for a few days.

Statues are erected to show honor and removed to show hate.

How long until the college snowflakes label the Bobby Bowden statue as offensive and tear it down, too?

What's a guy gotta do to get a Zing! published?

Wow! USA Today section Wednesday! Tallahassee hits the big time!

Sure, the cancer was aggressive. But the chemotherapy was also very aggressive. There was aggression on both sides.

I want my swag bag / Does the Chamber have some left / For peons like me?

Zing!'s with you – bring on the swag! Visit [www.tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your Zing!

## Join us Thursday to stand against hate, 'Unite in Love'



### Sean Cooley, Joy Dixon and Rachel Pienta

Over the weekend, along with many eyes across the nation, we watched in growing horror as the events unfolded in Charlottesville. A Nazi-inspired march of hate was happening in a college town not so unlike Tallahassee.

The hate amplified when a car plowed into counter-demonstrators, killing a young woman named Heather.

On Sunday, invites for rallies and gatherings to stand against hate and with Charlottesville began to pop up across the country. Some events organized with the idea of solidarity in mind; other gatherings fo-

cused on rallying against white supremacy, racism and hate.

The need to speak out against hate and racism goes without question, but a small group of Tallahassee leaders was also struck by the even greater need to bring people together. This desire to balance the need to collectively grieve for the lives lost in Charlottesville while also having space to come together for healing sparked an idea: a community gathering that could be a rallying point for unity.

This Thursday, everyone is invited to gather at Lake Ella near the gazebo for "Embrace Tallahassee – Unite in Love." The program will begin promptly at 6:30 p.m. The community is invited to enjoy live music from musical duo Hot Tamale near the gazebo starting at 5 p.m. Just across Lake Ella, Food Truck Thursday offers a chance to support local businesses.

This free unity event will include remarks from local clergy and community leaders. The event will conclude with a communal candle lighting and walk around Lake Ella after remarks.

Community organizations will be on hand to offer information on how to talk about hate groups at home with your family as well as with friends and neigh-

ors. Suggestions for next steps for action and opportunities to get involved in working toward solutions will also be available.

The need for unity among family, friends, neighbors and strangers is more relevant than ever in our country. All are welcome to attend some or all of the gathering.

While we have some candles on hand for the vigil, we encourage attendees to bring their own. Attendees may also bring flowers for peace and love. To help support the sense of community, flowers brought can be given away to a neighbor, friend or community member in a gesture of unity.

On Thursday, each flickering candle will spread a message of love and unity and share the light of hope with all of Tallahassee. We hope you'll join us. For more information and to RSVP via Facebook, visit [EmbraceTallahassee.com](http://EmbraceTallahassee.com).

*Sean Cooley serves as external relations co-chair of the New Leaders Council Tallahassee. Joy Dixon serves on the New Leaders Council Tallahassee Advisory Board. Rachel Pienta serves as contributing faculty in the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University.*

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# Zing!

READERS' OPINIONS STATED SUCCINCTLY

Trump’s prodigious feats of self-puffery put Steve Bannon to shame.

I could have knocked a person over with the force I used to swat that teeny mosquito.

Whenever Trump reads from a teleprompter, I’m certain he’s reading those words for the very first time.

The left is full of useful idiots who think their thuggery will qualify them for ruling.

Our transgender children are not good enough to fight and die for the USA but our straight children are good enough to fight and die for the USA, according to our president.

Regarding checks and balances, it’s looking like the press is the only organization that is serving that function.

Trump doesn’t need advisers or strategists, he just needs a producer and a director.

Thank you, Tallahassee Nurseries, for the big happy signs for the ride to and from work!

Please don’t build the wall yet, I may still need to leave.

I don’t think Trump understands that as President he actually has to get stuff done.

It’s 2017 people. You can wear whatever you please with sandals. I prefer black-and-white striped socks.

Can’t wait for the headline, Mr. President. “You’re fired.”

Instead of draining the swamp, Trump has sold swampland to his supporters.

If you aren’t really rich, then surround yourself in yellow and pretend it’s gold.

If the statues belong to all of us, then why can’t we vote on their future? Who decides?

I had ancestors on both sides of the sad Civil War and remember them all.

Supporters of Obama and his national debt should be required to pay for it.

The Zings have not been that funny lately! Probably because you haven’t been printing mine!

Hahahahahahaha. Visit [www.Tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.Tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your zing.

## OUR OPINION

# A simple yes or no could help clear FBI clouds for mayor

It’s not unusual in small- and medium-sized American cities and towns for public officials to occasionally run into awkward intersections of personal, professional and political life.

What IS unusual is for 20 FBI agents to spend two years investigating a city, spending at least some of that time with public officials at those very intersections.

Mayor Andrew Gillum, who is running for the Democratic nomination for governor of Florida, is one of those officials. He has spent the past few days unsuccessfully explaining the time he spent with Mike Miller and other undercover federal agents.

In particular, we are referring to an August 2016 trip to the Big Apple. Gillum’s New York trip was for a series of events for the People for the American Way, a self-described “progressive advocacy group” that employed the mayor up until February of this year. There is the professional. It included time with his good friend and former campaign treasurer Adam Corey. There we have personal.

And on it he spent time with undercover FBI agents who had been in Tallahassee pitching a \$100 million south-side development. There is the political.

But wait. Gillum claims that time to also be personal.

This explanation strains credibility. These undercover agents weren’t in Tallahassee to make friends. They were here to expose corruption. Their cover was that they were developers, wanting to do a project on the south side of town and use the CRA in the process. Even if they hadn’t turned out to be FBI agents, to claim time with Mike Miller was “personal” is akin to Bill Clinton saying “I didn’t inhale.”

The mayor’s credibility is also undercut by his confusing responses to questions from the media and selective utilization of what we not-so-lovingly call the “Shelley Doctrine.” That refers to Tallahassee City Attorney Lew Shelley’s advice to commissioners to not discuss the FBI investigation.

Gillum jettisoned that advice when WCTV obtained a picture of Gillum, Corey and Miller boating on a sunny day in New York harbor. He waxed at length about the nature of the voyage and what it meant. He characterized the trip as “a couple of friends getting together” and “hanging out.”

But when faced with simple “yes/no” questions from the Democrat



JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT

Mayor Andrew Gillum has pledged to cooperate with the FBI and says he’s not the focus of their probe.

about whether or not he attended a New York Mets baseball game or the Broadway show “Hamilton,” Gillum ducked behind the Shelley Doctrine.

Sorry, Mr. Mayor, but that’s not good enough.

First, Shelley’s advice is just that, advice. Legally, there is absolutely nothing preventing Gillum from coming clean with constituents about any and all associations with the undercover agents – especially if he’s not a target as he has so often claimed in multiple prepared statements.

Second, it really isn’t very good PR to only respond in detail when confronted with photographs of your activities. And third, surely you know that if you can’t answer “no” to those questions, most will, with some justification, assume that you actually did attend them. Given that he did not submit gift disclosure forms, this becomes a problem.

To take this even further, let’s set aside for the moment the inanity of the mayor’s explanation that this time was all “personal.” This is dangerous double-edged political swordplay for Gillum.

If he spent enough time with Mike Miller and his posse to be close friends, one would have to ask – so exactly WHY did you spend so much time with people who turned out to be

undercover FBI agents? Becoming close with undercover operatives is hardly a winning claim to fame, especially for a public official.

If he really didn’t spend that much time, then the question becomes: How can you claim the time spent with them in New York as “personal?”

As an aside, we can’t help but notice that the mayor’s use of the word “personal” matches the word used by city attorneys who claim they can unilaterally declare certain city emails to not be public record if it exclusively involved “personal” matters. That coincidence causes us to be concerned that emails related to this trip or other so-called “personal” matters have not been released to the public.

Mayor Gillum can put all this to rest by sitting down for an interview about these and other interactions with Miller and Co.

We certainly understand these intersections of personal, political and professional can be complicated and would love to be part of clearing the record. If the mayor hasn’t done anything wrong, it should be a relatively easy conversation.

Until that happens, this intersection of personal, professional and political activities is a pileup waiting to happen.

# Greg Evers had big heart, loved helping people



**Claudia Cotten Randolph**  
MY VIEW

Former state Sen. Greg Evers, a “down-home gentleman,” died Monday night in a single-vehicle accident near his home in Okaloosa County.

Greg Evers was my friend. We met in the Spring in 2001, when my partner Gerry and I traveled to his home in Baker to do a screening. It was something we did back then, screenings set up as initial interviews to determine whether he or she would make a good candidate and whether a race could be won. Campaigns were our lives.

Maybe things get a little easier as you move up the political ladder, but in my life, the higher I climbed, the less real my life became. The lobbyists swoop in. Your circle of friends widens. It is no longer acceptable for you to wear sweatpants and say what you really think anymore.

It wasn’t for me, and that’s why I’ve never served as an aide to anyone whom I’ve helped elect. Politics changes people. Getting elected, and being in the public eye, having a voice someone listens to, the ability to change a law, add a new one, dump an old one – bring a program to life, or kill one, that has an impact.

These things matter, and the people who make it happen matter. But they aren’t the only ones who matter because at the heart of it all are the people who live around you, the ones you see at Publix, at school at church.

These are sometimes friends and neighbors, some are strangers to you. Some politicians get too “big for their britches,” as Greg would say. They are too busy, have climbed the ladder too



CLAUDIA COTTEN RANDOLPH  
Greg Evers at an autism event in 2015 for FSU CARD talking to Britney Stone, a music therapist about the benefits of music therapy.

high and too far, to stop and listen.

Greg did listen. He cared about “the people” and he knew that there wasn’t really one “the people” but a lot of individuals. He listened to everyone by listening to anyone. He didn’t set appointments in Tallahassee based on how important you were. He left his door open and made himself available. That is how a legislator should be.

Politics may change a person, but it can also amplify the human spirit to do good for others.

For many years, I have worked as a volunteer advocate. I do what I can to help parents and children with special needs. Yes, I have children with autism, ADHD, and Down syndrome, so there is a personal motivator.

But I realized somewhere along the way that helping people is all that really matters.

Greg realized that too. That is what I saw in him the first day we met before we signed on to run his campaign. That is what I saw in him last year when he came to speak at one of the causes for autism.

Greg wasn’t doing it for political reasons. He loved helping people, and

he loved being able to pick up the phone, or pick up a pen and tablet, write a letter or make a call to solve a problem for someone. If we had the ability to open up and see man’s true heart, Greg’s heart centered around protecting his home and family and helping his community.

My partner and I did a really good job on his first and toughest campaign. But it was Greg, and his amazing family, an army of people who loved and supported him who sparked the magic.

They loved Greg because he was worthy of love. He had many friends, because he was a friend to all, even to his opponents. Greg was the first to forgive and the last to hold a grudge. Of the 50+ races I’ve been involved in, Greg’s stands out because he was truly special. I was a better at my job, I worked harder, I thought more creatively because he made me care about his people, and believe in him.

That day we met, Greg convinced us he would be the best man for the job. I am really glad he had the opportunity to make such a big difference for our state and that he will be remembered for more than just a couple of pieces of legislation, but also for the good-natured, kind-hearted, caring person that he was.

Greg Evers was unlike anyone else in Tallahassee, didn’t come from money, wasn’t groomed to be a politician. If anyone had given him a silver spoon I bet he would have melted it down to put on the tip of his cowboy boots.

Senator Evers, you “done good,” you made your family proud, and you will be missed by many.

Funeral services for Greg Evers will be at 1 p.m. Tuesday at First Baptist Church in Milton. Visitation will be from 5-7 p.m. Monday at the church.

Claudia Cotten Randolph worked on Greg Evers campaign and is a long-time friend.



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READERS' OPINIONS STATED SUCCINCTLY

Please don't ruin our town trying to make it look like a big city. It doesn't fit.

It's called the Jimbo Limbo. How low can he go?

Throw a thousand dollars at me and all you'll get back is a thank you.

The Democrat should have picked up Erwin's thousands of dollars and used it to fund the public records request. Two birds, one stone.

"DREAMers' parents paid exorbitant fees to coyotes to escape." Cry me a river.

Nobody's paycheck should be tied to a show of patriotism. This is America, not North Korea.

This "taking a knee" probably means you have a weak spine.

Let's change national anthem to "Let it Go."

Requiring nursing homes to have expensive emergency generators is just another government overreach making it hard for these businesses to make a profit and provide jobs!

Hugh Hefner said he never found true love but I give him an A for effort.

If this tax plan doesn't benefit Trump, I'll send him my piggy bank.

Bill Cotterell: Please don't disparage toads. They're beautiful in their own way.

*Just princes in disguise. Visit [www.Tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.Tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your Zing! and check out the Zing! blog at [Tallahassee.com](http://Tallahassee.com).*

## OUR OPINION



Federal authorities have demanded records from the city related to top local developers and projects linked to the Community Redevelopment Agency. JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT

# The city's obstruction of public information

If you think the city of Tallahassee grasps and appreciates the gravity of what it faces in the wake of the current FBI investigation, you must not have watched the end of Wednesday night's meeting. Obfuscation, mischaracterization and stonewalling continue to rule the day.

Let's break it down. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has now issued subpoenas on two separate occasions regarding the activities of the city, the Community Redevelopment Agency, and at least one of its commissioners.

This newspaper – and other media outlets – made a public records request for everything that was sent to the FBI in response to the subpoenas.

The response from the city was that it would cost this newspaper more than \$3,000 to receive the portion of the request that included city emails. Officials said the nature and volume of emails – about 50,000 – would require "extensive" review to black out any information that can be exempted under state law and to keep from the public nebulous so called "non-public records." To perform this service was estimated at a cost of \$25 an hour.

In light of the vital public interest in this matter, this newspaper lobbied members of the city staff and

then a majority of commissioners to waive the fee for all who request the information. Our position: This is the taxpayers' business and the last thing the city wants and needs is for the Democrat – or any other organization – to be writing stories or editorials about the city making it harder for people to have access to information on this federal investigation.

Wednesday night, City Attorney Lew Shelley seemed eager to enter the discussion and completely mischaracterize the request. No one at this newspaper has asked for the fees to be waived for just one outlet. The argument was: given the gravity of this investigation, records should be made public to everyone.

Commissioner Scott Maddox's misdirection was even more blatant. He argued that waiving the fees for this request would mean waiving fees for ALL requests.

No, it wouldn't. The city could easily establish a policy that requests for information related to the FBI's corruption investigation be free of charge to the public and that all other requests are treated as they normally are treated.

Only commissioner Gil Ziffer seemed to really get it.

"Let's make it available to anyone and move on," Ziffer said. "If we don't, it looks like we're hiding something and we're not."

Making this information available to the public at no charge should be a no-brainer.

It's remarkable (and yet oddly unsurprising) that Maddox and Mayor Andrew Gillum – the two city elected officials photographed with undercover FBI agents – are leading the charge to obstruct the public's access to information. And once again Shelley seems to think his job is to do everything possible to shield the public from the city's business rather than advocating for transparency.

This is exactly the type of leadership which has led to a dark cloud of suspicion over the City of Tallahassee.

It's time for the public to demand better.

After all, these are YOUR records of YOUR government which YOU paid for. Now we are all being asked to pay thousands of dollars simply to see records the FBI has demanded about how your own government was operating.

What's particularly concerning is that even if these records are released/purchased, the city has made no bones about the fact that it is removing what it calls "personal" records from what was sent to the FBI. Who decides what is personal?

The city attorney.  
And the beat goes on ...

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Transfer of elementary teacher was the wrong decision

As a grandmother of two boys aged 10 and 11, I find the decision to move teacher Chloe Bressack from Canopy Oaks Elementary School to Adult and Community Education shameful, especially since just 24 hours earlier Teacher Bressack received full-throated support from Superintendent Rocky Hanna.

Leon County was faced with the perfect teachable moment for our students and those watching – and we flunked the test. Instead of furthering the obvious lessons of acceptance, inclusion and understanding of others, we opted to close our minds and our hearts and hunker down in fear of people with a different world view. Instead of teaching our children acceptance, we have taught them, through our example, that if they dare to be different, they risk being ostracized or kicked to the curb.

We must do better. Let's hope that next time, if we get the chance, we open our hearts and our minds as we have been taught and set a better example for our children.

Mary Ellen Bateman, Tallahassee, meb52@comcast.net

### Government should not be in the development business

The CRA director, Roxanne Manning, finally said what we all probably know: "We are essentially developers or redevelopers" and "A CRA helps take some of the risk out of large-scale development and pays for things a developer could not or would not pay for."

Why should our taxpayer dollars be used to subsidize private development? Developers are in the business of making money and are rewarded handsomely for making good decisions. Government should have no role in taking on their risk or paying for the cost of development or redevelopment.

Why should we (taxpayers) be paying for roads (Welaunee) or other infrastructure? These costs should be factored in up front before making a decision to go forward with a development.

The response by supporters of CRAs is that these government subsidies provide jobs and income. This is not disputed. However, these economic benefits would also occur with no government subsidies.

So why do most of our elected lead-



BILL DAY/FLORIDAPOLITICS.COM

ers continue to support the diversion of taxpayer dollars away from more legitimate community needs? Maybe

Mike Miller will eventually tell us. John Outland, Tallahassee, outlandjb@hotmail.com

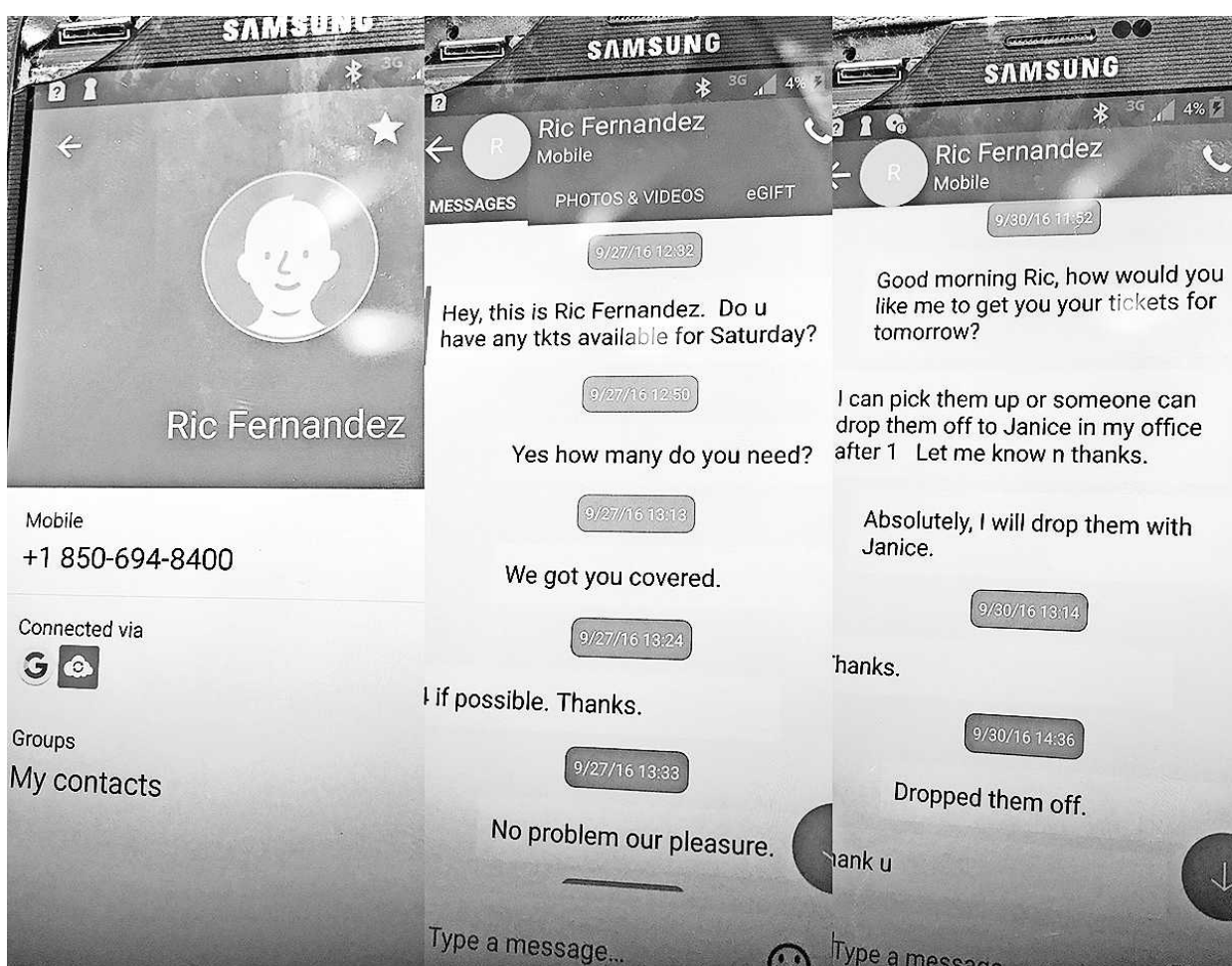
"Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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## OUR OPINION



This text exchange across three photos shows City Manager Rick Fernandez asking a lobbyist for football tickets. SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

# Zing!

READERS' OPINIONS STATED SUCCINCTLY

The Leon County Attorney already makes more than the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. A 10 percent raise makes sense to me.

James Madison Institute says to stop criminalizing addiction. Finally, compassionate conservatism.

If Jimbo would quit calling the players kids and call them men, then maybe they would start playing like men.

A county commission that gives two managers \$52,498 in annual raises is quite out of touch with me and my family

Does anyone else think a picture of Gov. Scott in a suit and tie looks like a snapping turtle?

As an FSU fan, I feel like a Democrat after the election.

Whether you like him as a gubernatorial candidate or not, Mayor Gillum's call on unified crime fighting is a needed and correct call!

Do county commissioners just give money away like that because they think they can?

The EPA is sticking its head in the sand until rising waters drown it.

A flat fact: Ignore his tacky tweets and look at his policy, appointments and accomplishments and you'll find Trump is doing a mighty fine job.

A 12:20 p.m. game is still a noon game.

Proctor was right: Move the Capitol to Carrabelle.

I was with the 'Noles when they were 0-18 too, but the tickets sure were cheaper then.

Wasn't everything? Visit [www.Tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.Tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your Zing! and check out the Zing! blog at [Tallahassee.com](http://Tallahassee.com).

## A crisis in confidence

### Public deserves answers about city manager asking for football tickets

The Democrat has written more than 60 stories on the FBI investigation into city corruption and related issues of ethics and impropriety. None has been more startling – and has included such a smoking gun – as the one published in Wednesday's Democrat on Tallahassee City Manager Rick Fernandez's Sept. 27, 2016, texts to a lobbyist requesting football tickets for Florida State's Oct. 1 game vs. North Carolina.

Here are the facts: In August, Fernandez denied to a Democrat reporter ever requesting tickets from Adam Corey's lobbying firm.

When the Democrat requested all of Fernandez's text messages from the week of Sept. 26, 2016, the city's response was: There were none.

But now we know those two things were simply not true.

In a string of texts stretching from Fernandez's initial request for tickets to the personal delivery of them to his office, the reality of what happened is laid bare for all to see.

By the way, if you are inclined to brush this off because the tickets don't have much value, understand that these were luxury box seats with an estimated total value of almost \$2,000.

Unsurprisingly, legal and ethics experts say this is not good. The Democrat also confirmed that the state ethics commission has subpoenaed and is in possession of these texts. But the more pressing question for Fernandez is – does the FBI have them too?

And now the city commission must tackle this issue, a task complicated by the reality that one or more commissioners may be in the FBI's sights.

But the questions don't stop there. Where does the city attorney's office fit into this equation? It certainly wasn't doing anything to promote

transparency.

The city's initial response to the public records request was as vague as it was unhelpful: "We have concluded the search for this information and found no information for the below request," wrote Susan Myers of the treasurer-clerk's office.

The Democrat then asked for clarification on its request for Fernandez's texts five different times. Each time the newspaper was met with obfuscation and delay.

Who was calling the shots here? What was done to recover the texts?

One basis the city has asserted for excluding documents from public records requests is the so-called "personal" exemption. It was first invoked by City Attorney Lew Shelley in April when this newspaper was examining how Andrew Gillum's office had become a nexus of the personal, professional and political, where the mayor's second job and political ambitions ran parallel to official city business.

Since news of the FBI swooping into town, the city has been pointing to the "personal" exemption with alarming frequency.

In a recent email to Shelley and Deputy City Attorney Cassandra Jackson, the city's Matt Lutz actually talked about creating a private "bucket" of emails that would be removed from a public records request and never be revealed to the public. Lutz wrote that he was collecting: "Items that may be 'personal' and therefore a non-record."

Our fear has been: The city is using the "personal" exemption to classify what could be at the heart of the FBI investigation as "private" business.

And now we have a smoking gun. The text from Fernandez to a lobbyist with Unconventional Strategies – Adam Corey's firm which at the time was registered to lobby the city – is NOT personal. If it was excluded as "personal," what else is being wrongly classified that way? If it was simply not turned over, that's in direct defiance of the public records law.

We also can't help but hear

back to Gillum's New York trip with three undercover FBI agents whom he thought were developers seeking to do a deal in Tallahassee. Remember how Gillum's chief of staff Dustin Daniels referred to that trip? Here is the quote: "The mayor has already addressed this trip, which was personal and not for city business."

"Personal." Really? Is there even any such thing as a "personal" out-of-town trip with real estate developers that want to spend millions on a large taxpayer-subsidized development.

Is it just a coincidence that the word "personal" is the same language the city attorney's office uses to withhold even the existence of certain emails?

If you are saying to yourself: "How can I have confidence in city government under current circumstances?" we're sorry to say that this is a fair question.

Fernandez must explain what has happened here – in immaculate detail. He must satisfy his bosses – Tallahassee city commissioners – who must then explain to their constituents what happened.

And the questions can't just be about the ethics and legality of requesting tickets from a lobbyist who had clients appearing before the city. Elected officials must also address what is happening inside the city attorney's office. The culture of stonewalling and secrecy must stop.

This office needs to start with what is in the public's interest, not covering for commissioners or staff. And by the way, the idea that Shelley should be allowed to hand-pick his successor is laughable. Confidence will not be restored by the status quo, but by an independent process leading to an independent advocate.

A crisis in confidence is developing within our city's government. It's time for the public to be provided answers, not obfuscation.

After all, the taxpaying public is paying for this government out of their own pockets. They deserve straight answers and transparency. Mostly, they deserve the truth.

## Rock musician James Durbin proves different is awesome



**Susan Baldino**  
MY VIEW

As James Durbin belts out the powerful lyrics to "Knock 'Em Down" from Quiet Riot's new album, "Road Rage," it is difficult to believe he faces the challenges that come with being "born different," as he describes it.

Quiet Riot drummer Frankie Banali describes Durbin as an amazing performer with an "insane vocal range," and more. "He is also a very gifted songwriter and brought to the record totally unique original lyrics and melodies. Not only do they fit perfectly to the music we wrote, but they took the songs to a completely new level."

Though the heavy metal lead singer has Tourette's syndrome and autism, he has not faltered in his pursuit of success. "Now," Durbin says, "I want to be

living proof that different is awesome."

Durbin is living proof and will be in Tallahassee this week to talk about his life's journey of music and disability and perform an acoustic concert.

Durbin's visit coincides with the final week of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the initiative that celebrates the talents and value of workers with disabilities.

"Inclusion drives innovation" is this year's NDEAM theme and it follows a long effort to recognize people who have exceptional skills and to ensure that they are included in the fabric of our society.

From the 1920 Smith-Pess Act that established the Vocational Rehabilitation program to the 2015 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that focuses on improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities, the U.S. has steadily advanced policy that enables careers.

Though policy has been strengthened, low employment rates for people with disabilities are a national, and even glob-

### If you go

» Conversation about Music and Abilities followed by a reception, 5-7 p.m. Thursday, FSU College of Medicine Auditorium, free, reservations required through Eventbrite  
» James Durbin Motivational Outreach program, noon-1 p.m. Friday, TCC Student Union Ballroom, free, all invited to walk in  
» James Durbin in Concert, 6-7 p.m. Friday, TCC Student Union Ballroom, free, tickets available at Eventbrite

al, phenomenon. The employment rate of working age Americans with disabilities has fallen almost continuously since the late 1980s. Of people with disabilities aged 18-64, only 34.9 percent were employed in 2016, compared to 76 percent of their non-disabled peers.

These dismal statistics can be changed if we look into the faces of our fellow Americans and see them as people first, not as people with disabilities.

As Durbin said, "I have Tourette's

and Asperger's, but Tourette's and Asperger's don't have me... You know, I'm James Durbin."

He's James Durbin first, and he's a star.

Let's celebrate Durbin's accomplishments and those of all people with disabilities by welcoming them into our workplaces, whether it is on stage or off.

To celebrate diversity, ability, and inclusion, Durbin will deliver motivational talks with a few songs at schools and colleges in the capital city on Thursday and Friday. His appearance at Florida State University marks the first event of the "University of Choice" initiative that advances accessibility and inclusion for all FSU students.

Durbin wraps up National Disability Employment Awareness month with a free acoustic concert at Tallahassee Community College on Friday.

Susan Baldino is regional program director for VSA Florida, the state organization on arts and disability. She can be reached at [susanbaldino@comcast.net](mailto:susanbaldino@comcast.net).



# Opinion

“An undefined problem has an infinite number of solutions.”

Robert A. Humphrey

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## EDITORIAL

# Fernandez still getting paid while city dithers on his fate

The Editorial Board  
Tallahassee Democrat  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Raise your hand if you would like to volunteer at your workplace to go on an indefinite paid leave.

OK, 90 percent of Tallahassee-Leon County, you can put your hands down now.

For the other 10 percent, in case you aren't clear, an indefinite paid leave is when you get paid not to work.

Somehow, Tallahassee city commissioners are viewing this action — taken against City Manager Rick Fernandez — as some sort of punishment. Or at least as a viable short-term policy.

Fernandez, you probably know, texted a local lobbyist asking for FSU football tickets during the far-more-successful 2016 season. Not just any football tickets, mind you — these were four seats in a swanky, luxury box with a total value of around \$2,000.

The Florida Commission on Ethics is looking into this matter. But given that Fernandez told the Democrat he never asked for tickets, then said in response to a public records request that he didn't have any texts during the time frame he requested the tickets, we don't understand why that behavior is being rewarded with what amounts to a long, paid vacation.

The City Commission, apparently intent on bungling this matter in every way possible, tabled the issue until its next meeting, so it could see what action the Florida Ethics Commission



City Manager Rick Fernandez listens during the Oct. 25 City Commission Meeting at City Hall. HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT

takes at its December gathering.

One problem: The state ethics commission meets two days AFTER the December city commission meeting. It could be months before the matter is decided.

So what? Another month or two or more of paid leave?

Here's an idea: Why doesn't the city of Tallahassee actually conduct an investigation into this?

There is no rule that says the city has to wait around for some statewide ethics commission to do its thing, especially when you have a local ethics board that has proven itself able to investigate the city manager's dealings.

Consider Friday's front page where the ethics board scolded Fernandez for what it called an "unacceptable level of poor judgment" when he accepted an owner's discount at a city subsidized restaurant for his daughter's wedding reception. The tongue lashing came after a thorough but expeditious investigation by the city's own

ethics officer.

In such an investigation, we doubt the city will encounter some sort of surprise defense. The only thing Fernandez has offered as mitigating evidence (to two commissioners) is that before he asked for the tickets, they were offered to him.

We don't see how that fact materially changes anything as the texts and Fernandez's earlier denials speak for themselves.

In a city hungry for strong, ethical, decisive leadership, city commissioners are once again acting tentatively and "protecting their own" rather than serving the public. What will be paid to Fernandez through December could have gone a long way toward hiring another law enforcement officer or giving police better equipment.

Instead, he will earn around \$20,000 a month to do nothing.

Raise your hand if you think that's the right thing to do.

Yeah, we don't either.

# Zing!

READERS' OPINIONS STATED SUCCINCTLY

Who needs snow days when you have escaped prisoner days?

If Jimmy Buffett can wear a hearing aid in a publicity photo, maybe I can finally convince my dad to wear one.

Coach has an awful season. Other schools try to hire him, or maybe we have to give him a raise. Say what?

Give an act of kindness to a stranger and tweet about how good it felt tomorrow.

If the Capitol moved, the politicians and lobbyists would go, too? Don't let the door hit you!

They say I'm unread, but I've been Zing!-published a dozen times.

Every one of the celebrities in today's birthdays have at least 10 years on me! I'll be feeling like a spring chicken until tomorrow's newspaper arrives.

That Waffle House frog has Morgan and Morgan written all over it.

I was so sorry to learn that the frog had croaked.

My wife just told me that I have the body of a god — Buddha.

How many women have accused Mike Miller of improper sexual advances so far?

I hope the guy who invented auto-correct dies in hello.

We agree. Visit [www.Tallahassee.com/zing](http://www.Tallahassee.com/zing) to submit your Zing!



RICK MCKEE/THE AUGUSTA CHRONICLE

## Law student's column on alcohol ban did not represent all opinions



### Your Turn

Daniel Buchholz, Michael Kaney, Lillian Sharpe, and Hillary Thornton  
Guest Columnists

We are writing to clarify a recent misrepresentation of the FSU College of Law.

A fellow FSU law student recently wrote an op-ed in the Tallahassee Democrat voicing her concerns with President Thrasher's alcohol ban for all FSU student organizations. We find many of the opinions and premises in the op-ed concerning, as they do not adequately represent the law school's efforts to assist its students with job placement, nor do they fully represent the students and alumni who have worked hard to contribute to the legal profession responsi-

bly. The recent op-ed grossly undersells what FSU has to offer regarding both job prospects and alcohol-free networking events. Our administration and student organizations host many events throughout the year to encourage student engagement with members of the legal community in personal and professional settings, many of which do not involve alcohol.

First and foremost, the law school recognizes the importance of living a healthy and happy life as an attorney. Each year, the Student Bar Association and the law school host a "Mental Health Awareness Week." The student body is proud to attend a law school that emphasizes the importance of mental health in the legal community. Moreover, the law school's career office has put a great deal of effort into planning monthly "Food for Thought Luncheons," which feature attorneys discussing a wide variety of practice areas.

Furthermore, our student organiza-

tions provide opportunities to engage with the legal community responsibly. For example, the Law Review hosts bi-annual judicial breakfasts featuring federal judges who come to speak with members of the journal. Additionally, our nationally recognized advocacy teams, Moot Court and Mock Trial, pair students with local practitioners and judges as coaches for competitions. Each advocacy team frequently utilizes the legal community for practice panels for the moot and mock arguments leading up to their competitions. Also, the SBA hosts a "Legislative Preview," where members of the Florida legislature, lobbyists, and attorneys come speak with our students about their experiences working in the legislative sector.

In sum, we are proud of the numerous networking events that do not involve alcohol hosted by both our faculty and students.

How does the ban truly affect the law school? As leaders and members of

multiple organizations, we believe that young professionals are perfectly capable of having a drink at networking events without jeopardizing their health or safety. However, the passing of a young man is tragic, and we support President Thrasher's decision to do what he felt was immediately necessary for the entire FSU community. The safety of our students is far more important than having a drink with future employers at a school event.

Finally, we want to clarify that the student body understands the law school's principal concern is education. We all chose FSU because of its superb academics, exceptional faculty, and loyal alumni.

Daniel Buchholz, Michael Kaney, Lillian Sharpe, and Hillary Thornton are all law students and presidents of various student organizations. These views represent their personal opinions and are in no way representative of any organization they belong to or positions they hold.