

The Ledger editorial page

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EDITORIALS

LEDGER OPINIONS

[OPEN GOVERNMENT IN POLK]

Let The Sun Shine

A black hole is an object in space whose gravity is so strong that it sucks

in and absorbs everything nearby. Nothing escapes, not even light — thus the darkness and the name.

Part 1 of 2

A figurative open-government black hole has been found in Florida. It is centered in Polk County and encompasses the county's two largest cities: Lakeland in the west and Winter Haven in the east.

From this region of governmental darkness, details and documents of important city operations have been so fully obfuscated that the Lakeland Police Department's lawyer told The Ledger that a report requested by case number was not related to the subject of the case, Bernardo Copeland Jr. of Lakeland. Only when the newspaper sent a photograph of the report's cover sheet, showing Copeland's name, did the department admit that the case involved him.

Today begins Sunshine Week, a national effort by news organizations to stress the importance of making governmental decisions in a manner open to public observation and participation, and making the records of governmental work open to the populace. After all, this is a nation "of the people, by the people, for the people," as President Abraham Lincoln put it.

That notion, this week and Florida's longtime reputation as a leader among the states in requiring openness — government in the sunshine and public records — make this an appropriate time to review the shameful efforts of the two preeminent Polk cities to hide portions of their work from their constituents.

'CAT AND MOUSE'

Lakeland Police Chief Lisa Womack gave a clear and shocking explanation of governmental arrogance toward the public. She did so by telling The Ledger's Jeremy Maready for a Jan. 6 article that her department sometimes plays a game of "cat and mouse" with news organizations when it does not want to release sensitive records. Public records belong to the people, whether sensitive or not, and whether requested by a news reporter or anyone else.

An important reason for records to be public is for the people of the city to judge the efficacy of their government and its agencies, such as the powerful Lakeland Police Department.

The Jan. 6 article dealt with the Nov. 24 shooting of Ralph Harper of Brandon at the Lakeland Farmer's Market, for which Copeland was charged with attempted murder and armed robbery.

The Lakeland Police Department investigated Copeland in a Sept. 30 shooting but did not charge him with aggravated battery in the first shooting until after Harper had been shot. It then withheld portions of related records when they were requested by The Ledger.

SPEED VOTING

Winter Haven has been working for more than two years to sell the city's most desirable land — on which sits the Chain O' Lakes Complex at the southeast corner of U.S. 17 and Cypress Gardens Boulevard, overlooking Lake Lulu. The idea was to convert the property into a private shopping, dining and lodging development called The Landings.

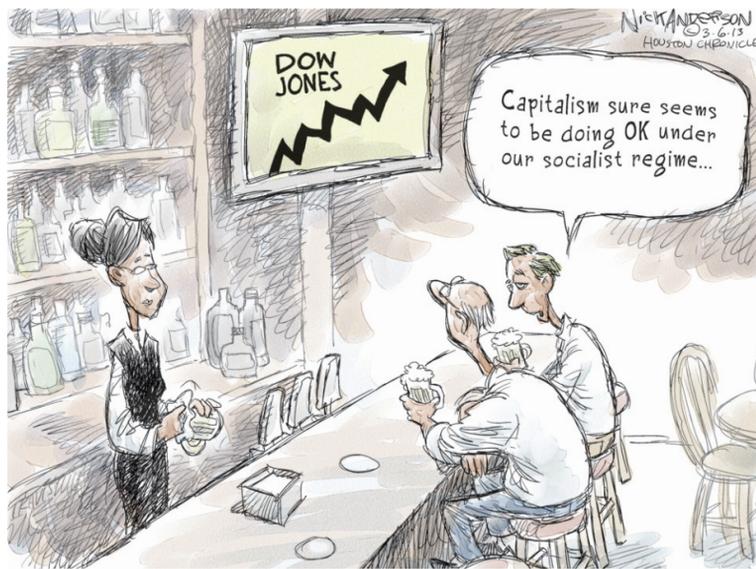
The City Commission approved sale of the land March 14, 2011, to a company of Taylor Pursell of Birmingham, Ala. By the beginning of this year, unending disputes between the two parties left the project logjammed. The commission voted Jan. 28 to terminate the contract.

The commission's three most controversial recent votes — including that vote terminating The Landings' contract — were taken without placing the issues on the commission meeting agenda, reported The Ledger's Ryan E. Little in an article Feb. 10.

That made it hard for residents to know that the issues would be decided in those meetings.

To abide by the spirit of the state Sunshine Law, the Florida Attorney General's Office recommends listing such items on an agenda or putting them off until another meeting when they can be listed.

These practices by the top officials of Lakeland and Winter Haven have a shady feel. Such leaders should reject the black hole approach of holding everything within. Instead, they should show confidence in their operations by opening them wide to the people they serve.



NICK ANDERSON | HOUSTON CHRONICLE

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

READER OPINIONS

Government Spending and Borrowing Got Us Into Sequester Mess

The sequester of \$85 billion, which went into effect on March 1, is expected to affect education, national defense, environment, public health and more. The debt ceiling never should have been raised to its present point.

The deficit absolutely needs to be reduced, and the government needs to cut spending.

But why during the last four years hasn't the government worked on the budget, line by line, cutting less money from the most important programs, more money from the less important and cutting out unnecessary programs and waste altogether?

Yet, in the article "Syrian Rebel Chief: We Need Weapons" [The Ledger, March 2], it was stated that "In what was described as a significant policy shift, the Obama administration said Thursday it was giving an additional \$60 million in assistance to Syria's political opposition."

U.S. Rep. Dennis Ross, R-Lakeland, asked the question in an article on Feb. 25 ["Americans Deserve Real Solutions,"] "Did you know that we spent \$750,000 to build a soccer field in Guantanamo Bay for terrorists?"

The March 4 article "Secretary of State Says U.S. to Release Millions in Aid to Egypt" said, "U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday rewarded Egypt for President Mohammed Morsi's pledges of political and economic reforms by releasing \$250 million in American aid to support the country's future as a democracy."

Another article, "Bearing Weight of Student Loans" [March 3], said, "StudentDebtCrisis, another nonprofit, is advocating student-debt forgiveness. Almost 90 percent of U.S. student debt — estimated here at \$864 billion of \$1 trillion in total student loans outstanding — is backed by the federal government.

Where is this money coming from? Is it being borrowed and increasing the U.S. deficit?

DOROTHY COSTINE BAGGETT
Lakeland

Sequester and Seniors

As an active senior, I am relieved for current and future retirees that the sequester does not negatively impact Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid benefits. The sequester will affect our communities, including senior citizens. Nationally, nearly 300,000 senior households will be denied the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program assistance paying their heating bills and literally be left in the cold. Also, more than 2 million senior transportation rides that allow seniors to get to the pharmacy, doctor and other critical stops will be lost.

LAWRENCE REED
Frostproof

Polytechnic Communications

I am writing to correct and clarify an important point in the March 6 article concerning Florida Polytechnic University ["Poly Chair Ready to Court BOG; Splits From Media"]. As a public institution and a new university, we understand the importance of being transparent and accountable to the public and of being a source of accurate, relevant and timely information to the news media as one of the conduits for reaching the public.

Unfortunately, readers of the article were left with the incorrect impression that Polytech intends to "split from [the] media." In fact, Polytech takes its public-communication responsibilities very seriously, and will actively and responsively engage all of the university's audiences and stakeholders. We have just announced the appointment of several new members of the univer-

sity staff who will be leading this important work.

As with any organization, it is vital that information provided to our stakeholders is the best, most accurate, most current available. To that end, the university will be designating appropriate spokespeople to help ensure all public queries — including those from the news media — are handled in a professional manner.

This will not preclude members of the board of trustees from addressing issues of concern about which they feel strongly or are comfortable addressing when appropriate. Instead, it will provide the board of trustees with a means of ensuring that journalists and other stakeholders have a source for the information they need, and that the university can ensure up-to-date, consistent information is being provided.

AVA L. PARKER
Chief Operating Officer
Florida Polytechnic University
Lakeland

Editor's note: The Ledger correctly reported that the chairman of the board for Florida Polytechnic University decided to no longer speak with the media, saying he delegated that responsibility to Chief Operating Officer Ava L. Parker. It did not say that the polytechnic intends to "split from [the] media." It also reported in a separate story that day that Florida Poly has hired three key staff members, including a vice president of communications and a director of external affairs. The university sent out a press release containing that information a day after answering The Ledger's questions on those hires.

Lymphedema Treatment Act

Lymphedema is a chronic condition that may result when lymph node function is compromised by injury, surgery, radiation treatment plus various other triggers. I developed this condition several years ago following cancer surgery and treatment.

The federal and state governments are just now learning about this condition, which plagues tens of thousands of people. The proposed Lymphedema Treatment Act is just now starting to get the attention of the public and our legislators as to just how serious this condition is or can become.

It causes swelling to the affected limbs, which can develop into severe infections and wounds that may not heal. Medicare and most private insurance companies are not aware of the severity of this condition. As a result, reimbursement is denied for support garments, which are ordered by treating physicians and therapists, while at the same time they are approving scooters and certain equipment and treatment aids for diabetics and obese individuals.

Go to www.lymphedematreatmentact.org to learn more about this chronic condition for which there is no cure.

JUDY BUKOSKI

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



Ruth Marcus

THE WASHINGTON POST
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Some Budgetary Ideas for Leaders To Munch On

This is going to be a column that praises President Barack Obama's new charm offensive with congressional Republicans and suggests some useful background reading for the next get-together. First, though, I have to get a bit of snark out of the way.

Such as: Isn't this the same Obama who decreed that playing nice with Washington wasn't working, so he'd be taking his case straight to the people? It's a false choice between the two approaches, but this tactical switcheroo is rather dizzying.

And, excuse me, if the White House thinks it's worth the try, couldn't Obama have attempted this a few months ago, before the sequester kicked in?

Meanwhile, there are a few incipient signs of thaw on the Republican side, indications that Obama's mealtime diplomacy may not be futile. Specifically, several Republican senators — Arizona's John McCain, South Carolina's Lindsey Graham, New Hampshire's Kelly Ayotte — have dared to say that they would, *gasp!*, consider raising revenue.

The senators attach two caveats: Revenue must come through fundamental tax reform (getting rid of loopholes, not raising rates) and be accompanied by reining in entitlement spending.

In practice, the entitlement debate in particular has become mired in unnecessary partisan line-drawing.

In theory, both sides agree on these approaches. In practice, the entitlement debate in particular has become mired in unnecessary partisan line-drawing. One side deems as essential proposals that the other has declared anathema.

Two prime examples: turning Medicare into a premium support (scarly version: voucher) program and raising the Medicare eligibility age. Endlessly arguing over those is not likely to accomplish anything in the current environment.

Hence this suggested reading: a new report from the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project, "15 Ways to Rethink the Federal Budget." Granted, the Hamilton Project is associated with Democratic policymakers, albeit centrist ones such as its co-founder Robert Rubin. Its animating vision of government is not the same as, say, Paul Ryan's. So proposals such as a carbon tax or value-added tax, however sensible, aren't likely to fly in the current climate.

But the Hamilton report contains several ideas that even Ryan could love.

For example, while Ryan proposes giving Medicare beneficiaries a set amount with which to obtain insurance, Michael Chertoff of Harvard Medical School and Dana Goldman of the University of Southern California propose giving Medicare providers a set amount to cover beneficiaries.

This "global payment" would replace the perverse incentives of the current fee-for-service system with a spur toward efficient, comprehensive care.

This approach exists in the form of the private Medicare Advantage programs that serve about a quarter of beneficiaries and in accountable care organizations being established under the Affordable Care Act. Estimated savings: \$100 billion over 10 years.

Another idea, from MIT's Jonathan Gruber, would attack Medicare costs from the consumer side. It would deal with the risk of catastrophic costs by adding an out-of-pocket maximum tied to beneficiaries' incomes so that poorer seniors would face less risk.

But it would also heavily tax seniors' supplemental-insurance plans that fail to impose adequate cost sharing on beneficiaries. Estimated savings: \$125 billion over 10 years.

On the tax side, Alan Viard of the American Enterprise Institute proposes replacing the home mortgage interest deduction with a tax credit worth 15 percent of annual interest on the first \$300,000 of a mortgage. Estimated savings: \$300 billion over 10 years.

Karen Dynan of Brookings proposes changing tax incentives to encourage low- and moderate-income households to save more for retirement and education, while reducing the subsidies for wealthier taxpayers. Estimated savings: \$40 billion over 10 years.

The two sides are talking. That's good. Before the next meal, they might take a look at the Hamilton report. It could help the conversation move beyond "no new taxes" and "please pass the salt."

