

Capital Report

October 4, 2019

At least 90 percent of structures in Panama City were damaged in Hurricane Michael. One year later, city officials are about to resume code enforcement actions. Valerie Crowder reports residential property owners say they're ready for the city to begin cracking down on neglected lots that pose a health and safety hazard to their neighborhoods...

Last year, after Hurricane Michael wrought havoc in the Panhandle, school officials began raising concerns about an emergent mental health crisis among students. Bay County Superintendent Bill Hussfelt said in the 6 months following the storm, 50 kids had been involuntarily held for mental health treatment through the Baker Act. But Regan McCarthy reports in the first two months of this school year, 50 students have already been institutionally committed.

Not all of the drama in Tallahassee happens at the Capitol. For the past week, a suspected murder-for-hire case has been tried across the street at the Leon County Courthouse. At issue is the 2014 slaying of Florida State University Law Professor Dan Markel. On trial are two people, Sigfredo Garcia and Katie Magbanua. They're charged with being part of a plot to kill Markel. But the people who have yet to be charged are the Adelson family of South Florida. Markel's ex-wife Wendi Adelson and her brother Charlie are widely believed to be behind the killing. Blaise Gainey has been following the action.

Following California's lead, Florida became the second state to introduce legislation pushing to allow collegiate athletes to profit from their name and likeness. Ryan Dailey spoke with House Minority Leader Kionne McGhee, who recently filed a bill to do just that – and it's got the attention of much of the sports world.

A day-long hemp summit near the Florida Capitol had growers, suppliers, manufacturers and economic development people eagerly anticipating the substantial returns on this potentially profitable crop. Tom Flanigan spoke with Florida's Director of Cannabis who will be involved in guiding the enterprise. (28:58)

October 11, 2019

Following Hurricane Michael's destructive path through Florida's panhandle, headlines painted a grim future for timber, a major industry in the region. The losses were huge – valued at \$1.3 billion dollars. Yet not all was lost. And Ryan Dailey reports some lumber and paper mills in the region are still going strong.

Greenwood, Florida's only grocery store caught fire after Hurricane Michael. A year after the storm, it still hasn't been replaced. Robbie Gaffney reports the residents of Greenwood are banding together to assist elderly and low-income residents who can't travel to find fresh food.

Hurricane Michael left much of Northwest Florida looking like a war zone. Gina Jordan reports that explains why so many of the area's children now show symptoms similar to those of combat veterans.

Governor Ron DeSantis is backing pay raises for teachers. But that comes with quite a few caveats. And Lynn Hatter reports while that's something teachers themselves have lobbied for, for years, it's being met with everything from cautious optimism to skepticism in some quarters.

Voting-rights advocates continue comparing Florida's new elections law to a poll tax. The law implements an amendment passed by voters in 2018 that aimed to automatically restore voting rights for most felons once they complete their sentence. But the law includes fines, fees and restitution as part of the sentence. Advocates say for many felons, that means their rights will never be restored. Now Regan McCarthy reports the battle is in federal court.

Blaise Gainey has been following the case of the murdered Florida State University law professor in 2014, which prosecutors say was a contract killing initiated by the victim's estranged in-laws. Tom Flanigan then reports the verdict, which convicted only one of the two suspects on trial in the case. (28:58)

October 18, 2019

When a person undergoing cancer treatment dies Florida law allows their sealed, unused medications to be donated. But some say that practice shouldn't be limited to cancer medicine only. Regan McCarthy reports a bill filed for the upcoming legislative session would create a prescription drug donation repository.

There's a chance Florida voters will be presented with a constitutional amendment legalizing recreational marijuana on the 2020 ballot. This week, Florida House committees heard from a Harvard Psychobiologist who warns of legalizing the plant, and from the nation's first state "pot czar."

More evidence of a shift in thinking arose this week among Florida's Republican leaders when it comes to climate change. Gina Jordan reports a Senate committee held a panel discussion focused on climate change forecasts and how state agencies should prepare.

The Florida Department of Corrections is asking state legislators to increase its budget so it can address long-standing issues with the treatment of correctional officers and prisoners. Robbie Gaffney has more.

Freestanding emergency rooms are popping up all around the Tampa Bay area -- nine have opened in the past three years alone. Health care companies are using them to reach more consumers, drawing patients in with promises of easy access to hospital-level care. But as Health News Florida's Julio Ochoa reports, patients and insurers are finding the convenience comes at a cost.

North Florida could be getting its first major toll road thanks to a bill signed by the Governor this summer. It's one of three new major roadways to be built in the state. One would connect Collier County to Polk County, another extends the Florida Turnpike west to Suncoast Parkway and the third expands the Suncoast Parkway from Tampa Bay to Georgia. A task force was put in place for each section but a member on the Northern Turnpike Connector thinks plans are moving too fast. Blaise Gainey has the story. (28:58)

October 25, 2019

Scott Israel's lawyer argued against last minute introductions of new materials that show the Broward Sheriffs department lost its accreditation following Parkland, and that the department's union voted no-confidence in

Israel. Still, the former sheriff's ouster may not be permanent. Israel has announced plans to run for re-election. And Gov. Ron DeSantis says if Israel wins, he won't suspend him again.

Florida Public Media station WLRN has been closely following the case. The station's Caitie Switalski and Christine DiMattei discuss the developments.

Under a potential law, teens in Florida would need consent from their parents to get an abortion. Abortion-rights advocates gave lawmakers an earful Tuesday. Robbie Gaffney has more.

For 25 years, Barbara Petersen has served as president of the First Amendment Foundation. She's been on a continuous quest to keep government dealings in the sunshine and hold lawmakers accountable when they withhold records from the public. She's retiring from the job at the end of the year. Her replacement is Pamela Marsh, a former US Attorney in North Florida. Gina Jordan sat down with Barbara Petersen about what's at stake as a new leader is ready to take up the cause.

Most Florida felons had their voting rights restored after the passage of 2018's Amendment 4. Earlier this year the legislature put in place a law that tied rights restoration to repayment of all fines and fees. But, a ruling from U.S. District Judge Robert Hinkle says the state can't deny the right to vote based on a failure to pay, as long as a person genuinely can't. WFSU's Blaise Gainey spoke with Supervisor of Elections, and a Clerk of court to see how a felon would go about registering to vote.

With legislators back in Tallahassee for their respective committees, State Surgeon General Scott Rivkees has been giving updates on the health challenges facing Florida. Ryan Dailey reports Rivkees warns lawmakers that vaping-related illnesses in the Sunshine State are ticking up in number.

Housing remains a major issue in the Panhandle following Hurricane Michael. The storm destroyed many of the homes—leaving families doubled up in partially destroyed homes, living in camping trailers or in some cases, even tents. Repairs are moving slowly—partly because many of the homes in the area were not insured and saving up to rebuild takes time. But that's not the only reason for the delay. Construction crews are overworked, and with no place to stay, new crews can't come into the area. But, as Regan McCarthy reports a new infusion of cash is heading to the Panhandle specifically to help rebuild homes and rental properties for low income earners.

Finally tonight, We'll stay in the Panhandle a little bit longer. Insurance fights, absentee ownership and a shortage of contract laborers have slowed recovery in the Panhandle. As W-F-S-U's Valerie Crowder reports another reason some residents are still struggling to rebuild or repair their homes and businesses is because they lack proof of legal ownership to their properties... (28:58)

November 4, 2019

Earlier this year, it was confirmed voting systems in two Florida counties had been hacked during the 2016 election. Tom Flanigan reports state and federal authorities have announced new safeguards to prevent that happening in 2020.

When he took office, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis set his sights on weeding out common core in K-12 education. Now, the governor says its replacement standards will be rolled out soon. Ryan Dailey reports in the meantime, 'the Nation's Report Card' shows reading proficiency in the state has fallen in the past two years.

Florida is near the bottom in the nation when it comes to teacher pay. Governor Ron DeSantis wants to change that by raising the base salary. But the state's largest teacher union says the governor's plans don't go far enough. Blaise Gainey has the story.

NPR's Hidden Brain podcast recently celebrated its fourth anniversary, and the radio show is now two years old. We regularly hear the host, Shankar Vedantam (SHAHNker veh-DAH-n-tum), on Morning Edition as NPR's social science correspondent. Gina Jordan recently spoke with him about his work.

When adults are feeling stressed out, overwhelmed or tired, many will take a vacation day or personal day off work for a little reset. Some might even take a sick day -- even when they're not feeling physically ill. Many experts say taking a "mental health day" to tend to one's psychological and emotional well-being is vital to overall health. And now a Florida lawmaker feels that grade-schoolers should get the same benefit.

WLRN's Christine DiMattei chats with Democratic State Representative Susan Valdes of Tampa. Valdes is sponsoring a bill (HB 315) that would allow Florida students one mental health day per semester as an excused absence.

The Apalachicola Seafood festival kicks off this weekend. Last year the event came just weeks after Hurricane Michael wrought havoc on the small coastal town. This year, it comes just day before a Federal court hears arguments in a case that could significantly change the community's future. Regan McCarthy has more.... (28:58)

November 8, 2019

While separate citizen proposals to legalize recreational marijuana struggle to gather signatures in Florida, some state lawmakers learned that at least one state that has already adopted that course -- namely Oregon -- is seeing some downsides. More from Tom Flanigan.

Citing what they say is a tremendous public and private cost to Floridians from divorce, two Republican state legislators want to create a "Florida Guide to Healthy Marriages." Ryan Dailey has the details on a bill filed for the coming session.

A judge appointed by the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments this week (last week) in the so called Tri-State Water Wars. The case stems from a fight over how Florida, Georgia, and Alabama should share the water flowing down into the Apalachicola River. Regan McCarthy looks into some of the history of the fight and what's likely next.

As more police officers and firefighters come forward to talk about mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder, departments are struggling to accommodate them. As Health News Florida's Abe Aboraya reports, a change in policy at one department is led to a first responder to the Pulse nightclub massacre being fired -- today.

Bring a scientist into every Florida school -- at least for a visit once a year. That's the big-picture goal of a new initiative funded by the University of Florida. Palm Beach County is one of five school districts participating in a pilot where scientists visit schools to share their research with students and form relationships with teachers. [NOTE FOR OTHER STATIONS: The other counties are Alachua, Escambia, Lee and Seminole.] WLRN's Jessica Bakeman visited Roosevelt Middle School in West Palm Beach to see the program in action.

Summer is over, Florida beaches, even in the Keys, are nowhere near as crowded as they were a few months ago. But the issue of sunscreen and what it contains lingers on in the Florida Legislature. Florida lawmakers are trying to overrule Key West's ban on certain sunscreen sales. They want the state – and not cities to regulate sales. Robbie Gaffney reports the proposed law is moving up through the legislature. (28:58)

November 15, 2019

In the upcoming months state lawmakers will grapple with a decision: how to stabilize the budget of one of Florida's healthcare agencies. The Agency for Persons with Disabilities has run deficits in most years since it was created in the early 2000's. Lawmakers have become increasingly frustrated about constantly having to backfill those deficits. But Lynn Hatter reports advocates are concerned over which chamber will get final say over how the agency moves forward.

Twenty nine people in the Panhandle were indicted on Friday for profiting from a federal drought assistance program. W-F-S-U's Valerie Crowder reports the alleged criminal network included nine government employees...

A proposed interstate agreement that would create a true popular vote election is moving across the nation. This week, one of the plan's original authors talked with state lawmakers during a lunch and learn event. Ryan Dailey heard from Vik Amar about the idea he hatched nearly two decades ago.

Toxic red tide algae is starting to bloom along Florida's west coast again. State wildlife officials say elevated levels have been detected recently from Pinellas to Collier counties. And people in Sarasota County have been experiencing respiratory irritations. Health News Florida's Jessica Meszaros reports on new research looking into long-term health effects of the toxins, including neurological issues.

Since the first one was captured in Everglades National Park 40 years ago last month, Burmese pythons have spread across Florida, becoming the most voracious predator in the wild and upending the ecosystem. State-contracted hunters have bagged at least 3,500, but nearly all of those have been on roads and levees, not out in the wild where the snakes are doing the most damage. A team of US Geological Survey and National Park Service biologists are now trying to find a better way to track and trap the snakes. WLRN's Jenny Staletovich went with them. (28:58)

November 22, 2019

Sunshine State lawmakers are looking into a revamp of the state's mandatory minimum sentencing requirements for low-level drug users. Some say the move could save the state money and cut down on recidivism. Others argue the current system works as a deterrent and helps to keep crime at bay. Regan McCarthy has more....

Ahead of the 2020 election, a federal judge in Florida ruled against a 70-year-old law placing the party controlling the governor's mansion first on ballots. Ryan Dailey spoke with a professor of constitutional law who breaks down the ruling.

Activists want Florida to be the 16th state to ban conversion therapy. The practice is known for trying to change someone from gay to straight. Awareness of LGBTQ issues is on the rise, however, the community is still not widely accepted. Robbie Gaffney reports in Florida—the clash is apparent.

Hate crimes have been a growing concern in recent years. The FBI's most recent data, for 2018, shows a small dip in Florida – but it follows years of rising issues. And hate crimes aren't always easy to prosecute – some categories don't fall under the hate crime umbrella at all in Florida. From WLRN in Miami, Madeline Fox sat down with David Barkey, to talk about hate crime legislation at the Anti-Defamation League's South Florida office. He helped craft a bill to improve Florida's hate crime law that was filed last week for the 2020 session.

Governor Ron DeSantis will have to make two new appointments to the Florida Supreme Court. The U.S. Senate recently okayed moving two Florida justices to federal court positions. The Judicial Nominating Commission is the Florida group in charge of vetting applications before sending a list of names to the Governor. Blaise Gainey spoke with Leon County Attorney Jason Unger about the process of hiring new judges.

Flu season is underway and the opposition to immunizations by some could put more people – especially older and younger folks – at increased risk. Tom Flanigan has that story. (28:58)

November 29, 2019

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is calling the 2020 legislative session the 'Year of the Teacher.' DeSantis recently rolled out his budget asks. Ryan Dailey has more on the requests, and the reaction from the statewide teachers' union.

Governor Ron DeSantis' proposed budget would fully fund Florida's two affordable housing programs. He is recommending that all \$387-million be used for housing needs. The Florida Legislature created the affordable housing programs in 1992 by raising the documentary stamp tax on real estate transactions. The money is supposed to be split between the Apartment Incentive Loan Program – known as SAIL - and the Housing Initiative Partnership Program – known as SHIP. But the money often gets sent elsewhere. Gina Jordan talked with Florida Housing Finance Corporation Executive Director Trey Price about what it means to fully fund these programs.

Backers of a state constitutional amendment proposal are trying to make it harder for the document to be changed. The plan has more than half the required signatures to go before voters next year and is in the middle of a state budget review. Blaise Gainey has more.

John Kennedy, veteran capital reporter now affiliated with Gannett Newspapers, tells Tom Flanigan about some issues to keep a particularly sharp eye on during the 2020 Florida Lawmaking Session.

In Florida, thousands of children live with an extended family member rather than a biological parent. But that's causing some issues. Robbie Gaffney reports a new proposal would give courts more power to reunify children with parents.

Forget Pilgrims, pumpkins and Plymouth. The first Thanksgiving feast took place in Florida, not Massachusetts. That's according to historian Rodney Kite-Powell of the Tampa Bay History Center. He sat down with WUSF's Robin Sussingham, host of The Zest podcast (29:02)

December 6, 2019

An active shooter and three victims are dead after gunfire at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola early this (Friday) morning, with at least 11 others treated at Baptist and Sacred Heart Hospitals in Pensacola. WUWF's Dave Dunwoody reports.

Gun Safety advocates say more needs to be done to prevent mass shootings. But some say their proposals could be hard to enforce. Robbie Gaffney reports.

George Zimmerman, the man acquitted of shooting and killing black teen Trayvon Martin in 2012, is now suing members of the Martin family and their attorney Ben Crump. Ryan Dailey has the story.

Florida's clemency process has faced criticism for being harsh, laborious, and too slow. In a 2018 a judge ruled it unconstitutional. But the state appealed the ruling and the court granted a stay – meaning the process hasn't changed. Now the only Democrat on the clemency board says things are getting worse. Blaise Gainey has the story.

Florida's Office of Financial Regulation finally has a leader. OFR has been without a commissioner since last spring. This week, the Florida Cabinet appointed a securities lawyer from Coral Gables to take over the office. But, as Gina Jordan reports, two Cabinet members disagree on whether the decision was made according to Florida's open government Sunshine Law.

Are they an innovative approach to the state's future transportation needs or an environmental and economic road to nowhere? Florida lawmakers approved the creation of three new toll roads during the last legislative session, but opposition from environmentalists, small business owners and local officials is growing.

"Just Say No" isn't doing enough to keep Florida's youth from experimenting with drugs. That's according to a coalition of state and local leaders who are working together to launch a new drug education initiative. Regan McCarthy has more.... (28:58)

December 13, 2019

Both Republican and Democratic lawmakers in Florida's legislature are taking aim at mandatory minimum sentencing for non-violent offenders. Ryan Dailey reports bills dealing with the rigid sentencing guidelines are advancing, and still being filed ahead of the 2020 session.

Are college and university campuses open markets for ideas or incubators of narrow thought? Some Republican lawmakers want to know what's really happening in the state's public higher education classrooms by asking students and professors to take an anonymous survey. But Democrats, and even some of those professors argue that's a violation of free speech and are suspicious of the motives behind the plan. Lynn Hatter has more.

Florida lawmakers seem to agree—something needs to be done about the state's Constitution Revision Commission. But they're not on the same page yet about what should happen. Regan McCarty has more.

For years, Florida's Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners - or ARNP's - have tried to convince lawmakers to let them set up offices independent of physicians. Doctor's groups have largely opposed the move. But as Gina Jordan reports, a lawmaker who is also an emergency medicine physician isn't giving up.

Last month, Gov. Ron DeSantis released his budget proposal, providing some insight into his health care priorities. Health News Florida's Julio Ochoa sat down with Mary Mayhew, secretary of the state's Agency for Health Care Administration to talk about the proposal. They start by discussing funding for people with disabilities, including ninety-five million dollars in new Medicaid money and another two hundred and forty million dollars to offset budget deficits in the Agency For Persons with Disabilities.

Florida's Agriculture Commissioner is calling for the exoneration of the Groveland Four. The group of men were pardoned by the board of executive clemency in January but as Blaise Gainey reports the commissioner, legislators and family members don't think that's enough.

When someone dies without a will, their land goes to family. But Democratic lawmakers say this type of inheritance is unstable. Robbie Gaffney reports on efforts to help heirs keep their property. (28:58)

rs were hopeful the legislation will finally pass. (28:58)