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WARRIORS GIVE CAVS 3RD LOSS IN A ROW

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Permit let Iran convert funds

By Josh Lederman and Matthew Lee
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After striking an elusive nuclear deal with Iran, the Obama administration found itself in a quandary in early 2016: Iran had been promised access to its long-frozen overseas reserves, including \$5.7 billion stuck in an Omani bank. To spend it, Iran wanted to convert the money into U.S. dollars and then euros, but top U.S. officials had repeatedly

promised Congress that Iran would never gain access to America's financial system. Those assurances notwithstanding, the Obama administration secretly issued a license to let Iran sidestep U.S. sanctions for the brief moment required to convert the funds through an American bank, an investigation by Senate Republicans released Wednesday showed. The plan failed when two U.S. banks refused to participate. Yet two years later, the revelation is re-igniting the bitter

debate over the nuclear deal and whether former President Barack Obama was too eager to grant concessions to Tehran. "The Obama administration misled the American people and Congress because they were desperate to get a deal with Iran," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, who chairs the Senate panel that conducted the investigation. And Republican Rep. Ed Royce, the House Foreign



In this April 16 photo, Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, speaks during a news conference in Cincinnati. [ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO]

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RISING HIGHER



Vanessa Mingo, center, takes a selfie Wednesday with Leon Corrico as they wait for a county inspector to check their work on a Phoenix Rising YouthBuild home the group has completed on Juniper Road in Silver Springs Shores. Thirteen 18-24 year olds participated in this spring's Phoenix Rising YouthBuild, where they learned job skills, earned certifications and built the home. [STAFF PHOTOS BY BRUCE ACKERMAN]

13 students graduate today from the Phoenix Rising YouthBuild program

By Katie Pohlman
Staff writer

High school diplomas, workforce skill certificates and construction training aside, students graduating from the Phoenix Rising YouthBuild program today say their biggest take-away from the last six months is the importance of commitment. Vanessa Mingo, 23, of Ocala, said if she could do the program over again she would talk less during the classroom sessions to better stay on task. She would also want to make a bigger impact than she did by being more motivated.

"Come strong and end strong," she said. Mingo will start school at Marion Technical College in August to become a veterinary assistant, a step toward her lifelong dream of becoming a veterinarian. Through the YouthBuild program, she further solidified that dream by observing surgery on a horse. She is not quite ready to be the one operating on the animals yet, but she wants to help. According to its website, the college has a year-long program that combines education in class and labs with hands-on opportunities for students interested in the field. "I just always had a soft spot for animals," Mingo said about her career goal

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Kurt Bunnell puts on his construction gear as he waits for a county home inspector.

Officials question scholarship program

Lloyd Dunkelberger
News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — More than 7,300 Florida public school students who are subject to bullying or violence are expected to participate in the first year of the new "Hope Scholarship" program, which will provide state funding to send students to private schools. But that estimate from state analysts may have to be adjusted based on questions raised Wednesday by school officials from around the state in reaction to a proposed rule from the Department of Education aimed at implementing the voucher-like scholarship program, passed by the Legislature earlier this year. School officials used the public workshop to try to clarify exactly how the scholarship program would work in their districts when it begins in the new academic year. Bill Emerson, an assistant

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LOCAL & STATE | B1 MAN ARRESTED

Accused of shooting at a woman and two children in May



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ANGLING FOR TIPS?

Check our weekly fishing report

Path cleared for World Equestrian Center

County Commission signs off on details to development

By Carlos E. Medina
Staff writer

Work on what developers hope will become an equestrian wonderland can now start in earnest. On Wednesday, the County Commission signed off on changes to the sprawling World Equestrian Center Ocala development

in northwest Ocala. Some of the changes are part of a settlement to dismiss lawsuits brought by neighbors of the project. Initial plans for the development, which covers more than 3,200 acres west of County Road 225A between U.S. 27 and State Road 40, called for main entrances into the complex off a portion of CR 225A, also known as Northwest 80th Avenue. Residents along the narrow two-lane road argued the

plan would turn their quiet country road in a traffic nightmare. Others objected to allowing the use of septic tanks in the proposed high-end community. After the county's initial approval of the plans last year, the lawsuits followed. A settlement came in February with the developers, RLK Investments LLC, agreeing to move the main entrance into the complex to SR 40 and to connect the planned 2,400 homes to

central water and sewer. But that plan upset residents of Sherman Oaks, a community located off of SR 40 east of the project, which now would have an interior road near their homes carrying recreational vehicles, horse trailers and other vehicles to future horse shows at the huge World Equestrian Center showgrounds, part of the development currently under construction.

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A Phoenix Rising YouthBuild home, built in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Marion County and other groups, is shown nearly completed and waiting for a county inspection Wednesday on Juniper Road in Silver Springs Shores. [BRUCE ACKERMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]

PHOENIX

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in an earlier interview. "It's just always been there. I've never had another dream."

Mingo and her 12 peers, all between 18 and 24 years old, will walk across a stage and receive their high school diplomas today to officially recognize their completion of the program.

From January to March, the students worked in a classroom to earn their high school diplomas and various certificates in a range of subjects. From March to June, they moved outside to build a three-bedroom one-story bungalow at 8075 Juniper Road for Habitat for Humanity of Marion County.

CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, which runs the program, uses these two phases to both help revitalize economically challenged areas of the community and provide educational activities to at-risk young adults.

As construction on the home slowed and graduation grew nearer, the students focused on finalizing their resumes and applying for jobs, said Career Coach Heaven Colon.

"We're taking it step by step with them and opening the doors," she said. All students have interviewed with at least one potential employer and, as of Tuesday, three of the 13 were employed, one was finishing an application to the College of Central Florida and one was highly considering joining the military, Colon said.

Colon and CareerSource CLM will continue to support the students after graduation to ensure they are working toward a higher education, employment or their goal. Colon said she will stay in touch with the students for at least the next year.

"My job is not complete until I see them employed, in postsecondary (education), or working to the next step," she said.

Gavon Eaves, 19, of Ocala, already has a job in the fast food industry lined up. He said the restaurant chain will help him work toward his eventual career goal of being a physical therapist.

He believes a good support system is the key to success. "You'll do good in life as long as you have good support," he said.

Next Phoenix Rising YouthBuild

The next YouthBuild will be constructed on Northwest 14th Avenue near Howard Middle School, less than a mile from CF's Hampton Center, where classroom instruction takes place.

Candidates for the program must be U.S. citizens age 18 to 24, in need of a high school diploma or GED and willing to work.

Orientation will be held 10 a.m. to noon and 2 to 4 p.m. June 28 at CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion, 2702 NE 14th St., Ocala. Site selection will be made July 10, with the project tentatively set to begin July 16.

To learn more, call 291-9550, ext. 2293, or 800-434-JOBS, ext. 2293.

During the program, the students attended career fairs and welcomed speakers from various industries. Colon said she also sends any job she thinks specific students might be interested in their way.

Through these efforts, another student, Kurt Bunnell, found a job in an industry he had never thought of before.

The 22-year-old from Citra will begin work at a plastic fabricator company after graduation. He originally connected with the company at a volunteer fair for Hurricane Maria. He was then invited to attend a hiring event where prospective employees were given tours of the facilities and were interviewed.

Listening to advice from his career coaches, Bunnell said, he showed up to the event in a suit, which — he was later told by the employer — no one had done before.

Colon and Success Mentor Beau Williams emphasized important soft skills and habits — like wearing a suit — since the beginning of the program. The two worked with the students to explain the expectations a future employer will have of them and how to succeed.

David Layman, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Marion County, said that while his organization benefits from the extra hands provided by the YouthBuild program, he hopes the students also benefit from lessons learned on the job site.

"While it may sound rather simple, our hope is that these youth will walk away with a basic sense of what their new employer will demand — a good work ethic — no matter the specific skills they may have learned in a construction environment," Layman wrote in an email.

Habitat for Humanity of Marion County will now take over the property and place drywall and plumbing

into the house in the following months. Layman said the family of three is expected to move into the home in about three to four months.

The majority of the Phoenix Rising YouthBuild funding currently comes from an \$806,000 grant from the US Department of Labor obtained by CareerSource CLM. The grant covers four projects for 48 students. Program partners include Ekerd Connects Workforce Development, Marion County Board of County Commissioners, city of Ocala, College of Central Florida (Hampton Center), Marion County Sheriff's Office, Neighborhood Housing and Development Corporation, Florida State Housing Initiative Partnership and Equal Housing Opportunity and Silver River Mentoring & Instruction.

The program is a national model and has earned recognition from the Florida League of Cities and National League of Cities, Harvard's School of Business and Habitat for Humanity International's highest honor, the Clarence E. Jordan Award for creativity and innovation in building homes and communities.

In addition to Mingo and Eaves, the graduates include Matthew Brown, Kurt Bunnell, Latoria Cohen, Leon Corica, Austin Edwards, Scott Gray, De'Vante Johnson, Vencent Mathews, Brandon Shippee, Zachariah Slaughter and Denver Surratt.

"They can now enjoy graduation and a feeling of accomplishment. "I want them to feel accomplished," Colon said. "I want them to feel proud of themselves. I want them to think this is just the beginning; it's going to open up other opportunities."

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PROGRAM

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superintendent in Santa Rosa County, questioned whether the scholarship would be triggered if an incident of bullying or violence was reported by a student but not verified.

"Because there are many times we get an allegation like this and we find out it's not true. There's nothing to it," Emerson said. Under the law, once an incident is reported to a school principal, the district must notify the student's parents within 15 days or upon the completion of the investigation, whichever occurs first, about the scholarship opportunity.

When asked whether the new rule could provide a tighter standard, Adam Miller, executive director of the DOE's Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, said the department is strictly guided by the new law.

"We are bound by what is in the statute. We can't through a rule amend the provisions of the law. We can only implement the law as written," Miller said. "So this rule really kind of fills in the blanks for process and procedure and some of the regulations in terms of private school participation."

The law identifies more than a dozen incidents — including bullying, harassment, assault, robbery and intimidation — which would make students eligible for the Hope scholarships.

Emerson said there are "unfortunate" cases at some Santa Rosa schools where students are caught having consensual sex, which qualifies as a "sexual offense," another of the incidents cited in the new scholarship program.

He said those students usually would be disciplined and sent to an "alternative" school, but he said that could change under the new law. "The way we read the law, both students would then be offered the Hope scholarship" if they reported the incident, Emerson said.

Other school officials raised the issue of students qualifying for the scholarships if they

were involved in "mutual" fighting, a common occurrence at public schools. In 2016-17, schools reported 19,742 fights out of the 45,313 "safety" incidents on their campuses.

But while the workshop questions implied the Hope scholarships potentially could be broadly used, one limitation will be the amount of money available for the program, which is designed on a "first come, first served" basis.

Early last month, analysts from the Legislature, Governor's Office, education department and the Office of Economic and Demographic Research projected that slightly more than 1 percent of Floridians who buy new or used vehicles each year will volunteer to shift up to \$105 from the sales tax they would normally pay on the transactions to the Hope scholarship program. It will generate about \$41 million each year when fully implemented.

The scholarships, which are based on the statewide per-student funding level, would be worth more than \$7,112 for high school students in 2019-20, \$6,816 for middle school students and \$6,510 for students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

In addition to using the state-funded scholarships to attend a private school, the Hope program would also let students attend another public school, providing up to \$750 in transportation costs.

During Wednesday's workshop, Florida School Boards Association lobbyist Ruth Melton asked whether the state or Step Up For Students, the non-profit group that will handle the Hope scholarships, will use a waiting list for students who qualify for program but do not get scholarships because of the lack of funding.

Miller said neither the proposed rule, which will be considered by the state Board of Education next month, nor the law addressed the issue of a waiting list.

Last week, state analysts assessed the impact of the Hope scholarships on the annual enrollment in Florida's public school system.

The May 30 analysis projected an estimated 7,302 Hope scholarship students in 2018-19, adjusted to 6,858 in 2019-20.

CENTER

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RLR agreed to build a berm and a fence to block Sherman Oaks residents from seeing the traffic.

On Wednesday, however, David Mackay, an attorney representing property owners in the area, tried to get one more concession from the developers. The owner of a two-acre vacant lot planned across one of the lot located entrances off 80th Avenue wanted developers to screen his property from headlights and the light of a planned sign. The reason: He hopes to one day build on the property and the lights could cause a nuisance.

RLR representative Jimmy Gooding's response: No way. The commission

unanimously approved the amendments to the plan, which now includes a sales office building near the SR 40 entrance. Plans for three large entrance signs also got approval.

Commissioners also unanimously approved an updated development agreement. RLR agrees to add additional turn lanes at the intersections of CR 225A and SR 40 and at U.S. 27 for partial credit against \$6 million in impact fees. The balance of the fees is due in cash by 2023. The developer also agreed to turn over land along portions of CR 225A to the county to accommodate future road expansion.

The development encompasses the current Golden Ocala Golf and Equestrian Club. In addition to the showgrounds and residential properties, the WEC will include a hotel and retail locations.

IRAN

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Affairs Committee chairman, accused Obama of trying to "hide a secret push to give the ayatollah access to the U.S. dollar."

Not so, former Obama administration officials said, arguing the decision to grant the license adhered to the spirit of the deal, which included allowing Iran to regain access to foreign reserves that had been off-limits because of U.S. sanctions. They said in the public assurances that Iran would be kept out were intended to dispel incorrect reports about nonexistent proposals that would have gone much farther

by letting Iran actually buy or sell things in dollars.

The former Obama officials disputed that the momentary access to U.S. banks to convert funds through the dollar constituted "access to the U.S. financial system." What's more, they dismissed the report as another example of a faulty approach to Iran policy by Republicans and by President Donald Trump, who last month withdrew the U.S. from the landmark 2015 nuclear accord.

"They continue to malign the deal in an effort to justify President Trump's unjustifiable decision," said Ned Price, who was Obama's White House National Security Council spokesman, referring to GOP lawmakers. Still, the report by the Senate

Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations sheds light on the delicate balance the Obama administration sought to strike after the deal, as it worked to ensure Iran received its promised benefits without playing into the hands of the deal's opponents. Amid a tense political climate, Iran hawks in the U.S., Israel and elsewhere argued that the United States was giving far too much to Tehran and that the windfall would be used to fund extremism and other troubling Iranian activity.

The Treasury Department license, issued in February 2016 and never disclosed, would have allowed Iran to convert \$5.7 billion it held at Oman's Bank of Muscat from Omani rials into euros by exchanging them first into dollars. If the Omani bank

had allowed the exchange without such a license, it would have violated sanctions that bar Iran from transactions that touch the U.S. financial system.

The situation resulted from the fact that Iran had stored billions in Omani rials, a currency that's notoriously hard to convert. The U.S. dollar is the world's dominant currency, so allowing it to be used as a conversion instrument for Iranian assets was the easiest and most efficient way to speed up Iran's access to its own funds.

"Yikes," one former Treasury official told colleagues in an email, as described by the report. "It looks like we committed to a whole lot beyond just allowing the immobilized funds to settle out."

The Obama administration

approached two U.S. banks to facilitate the conversion, the report said, but both refused, citing the reputational risk of doing business with or for Iran.

Issuing the license was not illegal. Still, it went above and beyond what the Obama administration was required to do under the terms of the nuclear agreement, in which the U.S. and world powers gave Iran billions of dollars in sanctions relief in exchange for curbing its nuclear program.

The license issued to Bank Muscat stood in stark contrast to repeated public statements from the Obama White House, the Treasury and the State Department, all of which denied that the administration was contemplating allowing Iran access to the U.S. financial system.