

Madison voting fraud case charges dismissed

Judge rules that no laws broken, just guidelines.

By **BILL KACZOR**
Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE — A judge has thrown out charges against one defendant in a north Florida voting fraud case and defense lawyers on Thursday predicted that others would follow.

Circuit Judge Julian Collins this week dismissed felony charges against Montollis Roberson, a volunteer in the 2010 campaign of a Madison County school board candidate.

"I think it effectively is going to end the case," Tallahassee lawyer Robert Cox said. He said his client, a nurse who lost her nursing home job after her arrest, was "absolutely ecstatic."

Roberson was one of nine Madison County residents, including two elected officials, who were arrested in the case in 2011.

She was accused of violating regulations for the distribution and collection of absentee ballots, but Collins cited a 1975 Florida Supreme Court ruling that says those provisions are discretionary rather than mandatory.

The judge also noted that the state conceded there had been no intent to cast a false or fraudulent ballot. Voters who received the absentee ballots said they were able to cast them for the candidates of their choice.

"The legal issues and the facts in this case are common to all defendants," said attorney Jami Coleman, who is representing another defendant, Raven Williams. State Attorney Willie

Meggs said he disagreed with the judge's decision, but added, "It's kind of OK." He said if nothing else, the case has shown the Legislature needs to tighten laws on absentee voting.

"It is an area prime for fraud," Meggs said.

Five other defendants are facing similar charges, including Williams and suspended Madison County School Board member Abra "Tina" Hill Johnson and her husband. Two other cases have been resolved through pretrial intervention.

Suspended Supervisor of Elections Jada Woods Williams, meanwhile, is facing separate misdemeanor negligence charges.

Johnson won the election by 28 votes. She and her campaign volunteers were charged with obtaining about 45 absentee ballots without proper authorization.

County science fair winners



COURTESY PHOTOS

Florida Gateway College hosted the Columbia County Science Fair this week at the Levy Performing Arts Center. **TOP:** The junior division winner of the Best in Fair Trophy, sponsored by FGC, was Victoria Marsh (center) from Westside Elementary School for her project 'Juice Mold.' Also pictured are Westside Principal Cherie Hill (left) and teacher Tammy Nessmith. **ABOVE:** The winner of the Best in Fair Trophy, sponsored by FGC, was Ryan Kasak (right) from Epiphany Catholic School for his project 'Microwave Emission of Cell Phones.' Kasak was also the winner of the Best Physical Science Project. Also pictured are organizer Janet Sweat (left) and Hannah Knight of Lake City Middle School, the winner of the Best Biological Project.

State tightens monitoring of juvenile justice facilities

By **BILL KACZOR**
Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE — State officials on Friday announced plans for quality improvements and tighter monitoring of juvenile justice residential and detention facilities following the arrest last month of a staff member accused of battering a 15-year-old girl in the Florida Panhandle.

The new efforts include enhancing mental health training, routinely interviewing youths and reviewing less serious incidents by the state. Such incidents formerly were handled by private providers or program managers.

"Our primary concern is the health and safety of Florida's youth," said Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Wansley Walters. "We are enhancing services to give kids the best foot forward so they can lead rewarding lives."

Ninety-five percent of the residential facilities are privately operated, and the

state is planning this year to outsource the remaining five. Those facilities are separate from detention centers, which are state- or county-operated for high risk offenders.

The privately operated Milton Girls Academy, northeast of Pensacola, last month agreed to end its residential contract with the state after the arrest and reports by other children who expressed worries about their safety.

The department on Dec. 12 released a surveillance video showing Shannon Abbott pushing a teenager into a wall, throwing her on the floor and lying on top of her for nearly 20 minutes in August. Abbott pleaded not guilty to the misdemeanor charge.

The agency in October also released a report on the death of 18-year-old Eric Perez at the Palm Beach Regional Juvenile Detention Center in July 2011 after a staffer dropped him on his head. The report said Perez lay vomiting and moaning on a mat after staffers failed to get him medical attention.

AROUND FLORIDA

Mom gives birth in moving car

OCALA — A central Florida couple is celebrating after their baby girl was unexpectedly born in the front seat of their car while on the way to hospital.

Laura Jimenez had already been to the hospital the night before but was sent home because her labor was not progressing.

On Thursday morning, the baby's father Leobardo Villasana started driving Jimenez to the hospital after her water broke.

But as they battled their way through sluggish rush hour traffic, Jimenez said she had to push.

The mother said she was surprised at the easy birth of the eight-pound baby. This is her third child.

Villasana continued driving to the hospital, never stopping the car for the birth.

Man, 3 children die in wreck

LAKELAND — Florida authorities say that a man and three children have been killed in a wreck northwest of Orlando.

The Florida Highway Patrol said the accident occurred Friday night on SR 33 in Lake County. Police said in a news release that "for an unknown reason" 41-year-old Wilfredo Malave lost control of his 2009 Mercedes, which struck several trees and a pole before hitting another tree and coming to a rest.

The father and his 9-year-old son Zion were pronounced dead at the scene; a 7-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl died at Southlake Hospital.

The driver and the children were wearing seat belts or child restraints.

FEMA rejects Sandy disaster aid

Tallahassee — Florida officials say the Federal Emergency Management Agency has denied disaster assistance for areas of the state damaged by Hurricane Sandy.

The Florida Division of Emergency Management reports that Gov. Rick Scott received notification of the denial Thursday.

Scott requested federal assistance on Nov. 1 for Brevard, Broward, Indian River, Martin, Miami-Dade, Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties as a result of damage from Hurricane Sandy on Oct. 24-26. Officials say Florida sustained \$44.9 million in damage to infrastructure and beaches.

Miami airport hits passenger record

MIAMI — Miami International Airport officials say a record number of people traveled through their terminals in 2012.

According to officials, 39.5 million passengers came through the airport last year. That's up more than 1.1 million passengers from 2011.

■ Associated Press

NOTICE OF MEETING

COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE CITY OF LAKE CITY

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Community Redevelopment Advisory Committee for the City of Lake City, Florida will hold a meeting on Tuesday, January 22, 2013 at 5:30 P.M., in the Council Chambers located on the second floor of City Hall at 205 North Marion Avenue, Lake City, Florida.

All interested persons are invited to attend.

AUDREY E SIKES, MMC
City Clerk

NOTICE OF MEETING

LAKE CITY COMMUNITY REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY CITY OF LAKE CITY

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Lake City Community Redevelopment Agency for the City of Lake City, Florida will hold a meeting on Tuesday, January 22, 2013, at 6:45 P.M., in the Council Chambers located on the second floor of City Hall at 205 North Marion Avenue, Lake City, Florida.

THE PURPOSE OF THE MEETING IS TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

- Façade Grant application

All interested persons are invited to attend.

AUDREY E SIKES, MMC
City Clerk

CITY COUNCIL MEETING

THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF LAKE CITY, FLORIDA WILL MEET ON TUESDAY, JANUARY 22, 2013 AT 7:00 P.M. IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS LOCATED ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF CITY HALL AT 205 NORTH MARION AVENUE, LAKE CITY, FLORIDA

All interested persons are invited to attend.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS: If you require special aid or services for any of the meetings identified above, as addressed in the American Disabilities Act, please contact the City Manager's Office at (386) 719-5768.

AUDREY E SIKES, MMC
City Clerk