



Financing Fido

It's gotten harder for pet owners — and vets — to shoulder pet-care costs in the down economy. But the nonprofit St. Francis Animal Hospital is looking for ways to make sure all animals get the care they need. The Jacksonville hospital, at 3615 Dupont Ave., which already offers a sliding scale to cash-strapped pet owners, passed the qualification round to win a \$250,000 Pepsi Refresh Everything Grant, and it's asking Jacksonville residents to go online during July and cast a vote for them. There's a link to the contest at stfrancisanimalhospital.org.

Dogs on Drugs

20 nanograms of benzoylecgonine — Amount of the cocaine metabolite found in Scotty Smalls, a greyhound race dog tested before winning a Jan. 6 dog race at Orange Park Kennel Club. Scotty Smalls was one of two dogs at the track to test positive for cocaine use. The dog's owners, who denied administering the drug to the dogs, were arrested.

140 Character-Building

Worried about all that *sexting* your teen may (or may not) be engaging in? Try replacing it with chaste and morally sound SPAM. The Northeast Florida abstinence group Project S.O.S. is offering to sell local

parents a daily texting service, which will fill their kids' cell phones with "daily inspirational messages" 7 days a week, 365 days a year. How much does this amazing service cost? According to the company's press release, "less than two cups of coffee a month."



Less Than Nothing

"A total waste of paper, resources, time and the color yellow." — Jacksonville resident Dan Fulmer, telling First Coast News that his family hasn't used the Yellow Pages in the last 10 years, after 590,000 copies of the directory were delivered in the Jacksonville area.

AstroTurf for Everyone!

In a press release extolling Jacksonville University for choosing an AstroTurf football field, company flak Todd Briton pointed out that the product has environmental benefits. A football field of natural grass uses 500,000 to 1 million gallons of water annually, as well as a ton of fertilizers and pesticides. AstroTurf? None. If only all our plush green lawns were made from recycled plastic ...



Walter Coker

Blown Away

St. Johns County whistleblowers say they got the shaft for reporting what's wrong

Two St. Johns County employees who were fired after they reported fraud say the recent treatment of St. Augustine Amphitheatre General Manager Ryan Dettra is typical of an administration that believes in punishing the messenger.

Dettra, who was suspended after raising questions about County Administrator Michael Wanchick's management of a contract to build the Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, was ultimately placed on probation and had his salary cut by \$4,000 a year.

According to two other former county employees, Dettra was lucky.

Cory Mara, a former geographic information systems specialist with the county's Growth Management division, was fired on Nov. 10, 2009, for using his county computer to visit eBay, Craigslist and check his personal e-mail. Personal use of a county computer is a violation of county policies, and Mara concedes the point. But he believes the real reason for his dismissal was the anonymous complaint he filed with the county's Fraud, Waste and Abuse unit on Sept. 17, 2008. In the complaint, Mara said that a local building contractor was forging signatures on electrical permits, notarizing his own signature in violation of the law and submitting fabricated county Certificates of Occupancy to his bank. Instead of going after the contractor, Mara says the county launched a full-scale investigation of him.

"If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't have said anything," says Mara, who worked for the county for 12 years before his termination.

Former Personnel Services employee Candice Tabb says something similar happened to her. She was fired after 18 years of working for the county for "unsatisfactory work performance." She previously held the title of Human Resources Manager, noting that the county once thought enough of her abilities to ask her to take over contract negotiations with the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners Local 1820, following the departure of her department head. Tabb says she got the negotiations back on track and had the contract ready for the St. Johns County Commission's signature when her new supervisor interceded and added new

Both Mara and Tabb have filed lawsuits against the county contesting their termination and alleging the county violated protections they should have been given under the state Whistle-blower's Act. The county has moved to have both lawsuits dismissed.

Mara says his punishment for Internet use was heavy-handed and way out of line, compared to the punishment meted out to other employees for similar infractions. He produced a letter addressed to another employee of the county's Information Services department in 2007 who had browsed on LLBean.com, buy.com, mileyworld.com, pricegrabber.com, samsclub.com and other

Candice Tabb notes that the county once thought enough of her abilities to ask her to take over contract negotiations with the carpenters' union.

conditions, prompting the union to back out. Tabb says she was fired because the contract wasn't ready for the Nov. 17 commission meeting, and she was never given an opportunity to explain what had happened. Like Mara, she feels the real reason for her termination is partly because she complained to the county's Fraud, Waste and Abuse unit about a fellow employee whom she thought was committing insurance fraud by adding her granddaughter to her medical policy.

"It's all politics and a lot of lies and cover-up," says Tabb. "They basically set me up."

sites on his county computer. Instead of being terminated, that employee was reminded of conversations he'd had with a supervisor in the past regarding his web surfing, and given a written warning that said the next step would be a three-day suspension without pay.

Although Mara made his first complaint anonymously, he followed up with a signed complaint, which he gave to a member of the county's Planning and Zoning Agency, who in turn met with several county administrators to discuss it. Because the allegations included possible criminal action, the Clerk of the

Court's fraud examiner Brooke Tedford turned the matter over to the local Sheriff's Office. Sheriff's Office investigators confirmed that electrical permits had been forged, and fraudulent Certificates of Occupancy had been created by Brian Beverly of Beverly & Harrison Construction Inc. When Det. Timothy Robertson asked Beverly about it, he said he'd gotten the phony COAs from Mara.

At that point, Mara says, the fraud investigation turned toward him. Although neither the county nor the sheriff's investigator ever told him about Beverly's allegation, they began an exhaustive review of Mara's computer records and e-mails. The county found nothing linking the fraudulent COAs to Mara. They did, however, discover that he was visiting eBay and other websites, such as Folio Weekly's blog Flog, on the county computer.

While Mara was fired, Beverly was allowed to bring the electrician whose signature he'd forged to county offices in order to "correct" the permits with his actual signature. Meanwhile, Beverly's bank declined to take

action. Although the fabricated COAs might have constituted bank fraud, if they'd prompted the bank to release money to Beverly & Harrison, the bank said it had not released any money based on the COAs and that the company was current on its loans.

Months later, however, the electrician himself complained to the Sheriff's Office, saying Beverly was forging his signature on permits. The Sheriff's Office told him they would refer the matter to the state Department of Business and Professional Regulation. In the end, the agency fined Beverly's partner Michael Harrison \$100 for "misusing" his certified residential contractor license. It was the only punishment to come out of the forgeries — unless you believe, as Cory Mara does, that his own dismissal was a result.

"From the time I called the Fraud, Waste and Abuse hotline," says Cory Mara, "it was a witch hunt." □

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Walter Coker's Through the Lens



Park Street, Five Points, Jacksonville, July 20

Bouquets & Brickbats

Brickbats to Morgan Dallan Ingerson for turning a problem with a kid-unfriendly Corgi-Jack Russell terrier mix into a gruesome horror movie come-to-life. After the six-month-old puppy snarled and snapped at Ingerson's two-year-old daughter, Ingerson said he feared the puppy might have rabies. In response, he killed the animal by smashing its skull with a shovel, beheaded it, skinned the head and removed its eyeballs. Several days later, Ingerson brought the skinned head to Jacksonville Animal Care to be tested for rabies. The tests were negative. Ingerson has been charged with cruelty to animals.

Brickbats to St. Johns River Water Management District's governing board for lavishing a \$30,000 bonus on its director at a time when revenues are down by \$66 million. Critical programs will have to be gutted, but Kirby Green's bank account is fat. He was also given the \$30,000 award in 2009. Green is now the highest-paid water management director in the state. For the money, SJRWMD has a leader who would suck rivers and creeks dry rather than limit development or push conservation.

Bouquets to UNF Spinnaker staffers Erik Tanner and Dan Rosemund for bringing exemplary journalism to their student newspaper. Tanner (a former Folio Weekly photo intern) won first place in photojournalism in the national 2010 Black Slate annual design contest for college students. His winning photograph was of a homeless man. Rosemund, the Spinnaker's layout editor, won third place for a cover entry he designed, "Savoior or Socialist," on Pres. Barack Obama.



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