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Photo courtesy America's Youth
John Gilbert with Santa at the annual America's Youth
Lighted Christmas Parade and Community Christmas
party. Both events have become fixtures in Fernandina
Beach, Florida

After nearly three decades, John Gilbert Sr. steps back from America's Youth

By Tracy McCormick-Dishman
tdishman@nassauonline.net

John Gilbert Sr. has spent almost 30 years making sure Fernandina Beach kids had somewhere to go after school, someone to check their homework and, if they needed it, a hot meal. This summer, for the first time since 1998, that somewhere will not be run by him.

Gilbert, founder of America's Youth Inc., retired June 30. He said his health has been declining and that was the deciding factor. "Yeah, my health is deteriorating," Gilbert told the NewsLine.

He was careful to say the organization is not closing. He is stepping back from day-to-day leadership, not walking away from the mission.

"I sure hope so," Gilbert said when asked whether America's Youth would continue without him.

As for what comes next for him personally, Gilbert was not ready to say much. He described it only as a continuation of the calling that led him to found America's Youth in the first place.

"Same direction, bigger project," Gilbert said.

Six kids under the trees

Gilbert, a disabled U.S. Army veteran and Fernandina Beach native, played football at Florida A&M University and attended officer candidate school before returning home. He worked in manufacturing and coached basketball before America's Youth became his full-time calling.

The program started small: six students, working on track and field and cross-country, with practices held outdoors before the group found space in a local church. It later moved into what Gilbert remembers as Macedonia.

Two of those early athletes qualified for the national junior olympics four years in a row, and it was that early success, and the demand it created, that pushed the program to grow.

"Other kids wanted to run track, but they didn't have the grades," Gilbert said. "So we started doing an after-school program, and it grew from that."

America's Youth cont. on pg. 2

Libraries At Risk

As Nassau library use soars, cuts head toward final vote

By Tracy McCormick-Dishman

Nassau County commissioners are on track to close the Bryceville library, cut the Yulee branch to three days a week and trim Fernandina Beach library hours, even as new data shows library use in the county climbing sharply. Commissioners were expected to finalize the cuts alongside the county's fiscal year 2026-27 budget at a final hearing Sept. 28.

The cuts trace back to summer budget talks, when the Yulee library's hours were also cut from five days a week to three (Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday only), tied to a lease-rate increase Florida State College at Jacksonville (FSCJ) began charging the county, according to library and Friends of the Yulee Library (FOYL) representatives.

Commissioners approved a tentative \$452.8 million budget and a sixth consecutive year of countywide millage rate reduction Sept. 14, County Manager Taco Pope told the board. To balance the budget, the plan eliminates all county funding for nonprofits, closes the Bryceville library, cuts Yulee library hours to three days a week and trims Fernandina Beach library hours by roughly a day. According to FOYL, FSCJ is charging more than \$50,000 a year for the Yulee library to remain open five days a week at its current location. The county has instead agreed to pay approximately \$30,000 a year for the branch to stay open three



Photo courtesy Friends of the Yulee Library
A family visits the Yulee library.



Photo courtesy Friends of the Yulee Library
Friends of the Yulee Library President Nancy Bowyer, standing, and local author, Kay Dew Shostak, seated, with the Beach Reads Quilt, which FOYL raffled off to raise funds for the library.

days a week, a rate that took effect July 1, 2026.

Assistant County Manager Marshall Eyerman said the cuts could be revisited depending on a statewide homestead exemption ballot measure in November, which could cut the county's property tax revenue by as much as 33% within two years.

Usage climbs as service shrinks

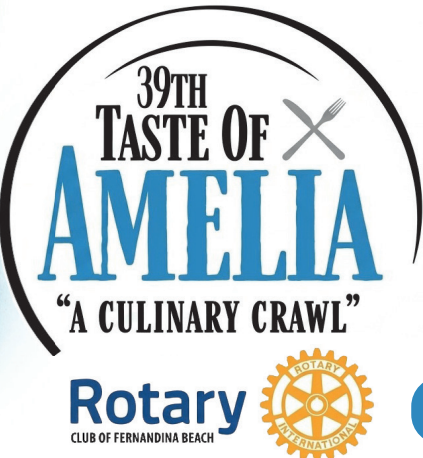
Even as cuts advance, library usage in Nassau County has grown sharply. At the Yulee branch, circulation rose 150% and visits rose 299%

between 2022 and 2025, according to library statistics. Countywide, more than 75,000 residents hold a library card, and more than 2,800 new cards have been issued so far this fiscal year.

Voices from the meeting

More than a half-dozen speakers addressed commissioners at the Sept. 14 meeting, asking

Library cont. on pg. 2



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Nancy Bowyer, president of the Friends of the Yulee Library, addresses the Nassau County Board of County Commissioners during the Sept. 14 budget hearing.



Angie Hall, president of the Friends of the Bryceville Branch Library, urges Nassau County commissioners to keep the library open during public comment at the Sept. 14 budget hearing.



Gary Morgan, a member of the Friends of the Yulee Library, speaks in support of restoring library funding during public comment Sept. 14.



Mary Louise Hester, president of the Fernandina Beach Friends of the Library, addresses commissioners during the Sept. 14 Nassau County budget hearing.

Library cont. from pg. 1

the board to restore funding before the final vote. Angie Hall, president of the Friends of the Bryceville Branch Library, said the branch's circulation is up 90% over the past three years and visits are up 431%. A library, she said, "is more than just books. It is the living room, the classroom and the technological lifeline for our community." With Bryceville's branch closed, the nearest library would be the Callahan branch, more than 14 miles away, according to library staff.

Nancy Bowyer, president of the Friends of the Yulee Library, told commissioners the library system logged more than 48,000 uses of electronic items so far this fiscal year, with print circulation still more than three times that of electronic formats. She asked the board "to use wise planning to restore the Yulee branch to a five-day week."

Commissioner Klynt Farmer responded directly to the speakers. "We hear you. We understand ... we hope that ... we can try to come up with better plans," he said.

A debate online

While fewer than a dozen residents spoke at the Sept. 14 meeting, hundreds more have weighed in online. In one post cited by Bowyer during her testimony, a commenter argued libraries may be becoming obsolete now that books are widely available online. Library data tells a different story, Bowyer said: print circulation still runs more than three times that of electronic formats.

Elsewhere, a Facebook thread asking "Who still goes to the library?" drew dozens of replies. Patty wrote that it's people without computers or printers, researchers, genealogists, and kids and adults who need a quiet space to study. Donna described being surprised by how busy her local library was during a recent visit, saying the children's room stayed busy with books, computers



FOYL Secretary, Maureen Stanski, plays checkers with children during Family Game Night at the Yulee library.

and preloaded educational iPads. Jolene answered in one word: "Families."

Rachel shared a more personal account. "The

library was a lifesaver while my kids were in school," she wrote, recalling a period living in a hotel after "a horrible living situation" when she

and her children spent time in the Fernandina Beach library's kids area "for a sense of normalcy." "We need physical books more now than ever," she added.

The conversation isn't over

At the time of this edition's printing, the Sept. 28 meeting had not yet taken place. FOYL has sent letters to all five county commissioners asking them to support restoring the Yulee branch's five-day schedule and says it has not received a specific commitment in response. Residents can attend the hearing and speak for up to three minutes, or submit letters ahead of time. FOYL meets the first Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. at the Yulee library on the FSCJ campus.

See the box below for commissioner contact information.

- Nassau County commissioners:**
- John F. Martin, District 1 (Fernandina Beach), (904) 570-2594, jmartin@nassaucountyfl.com
 - A.M. "Hupp" Huppmann, District 2 (South Amelia Island, Nassauville, O'Neil), (904) 319-0686, ahuppmann@nassaucountyfl.com
 - Jeff Gray, vice chair, District 3 (Yulee, Chester, Blackrock), (904) 570-1946, jgray@nassaucountyfl.com
 - Alyson R. McCullough, chair, District 4 (Hilliard, Bryceville, Boulogne, Kings Ferry, Nassau Oaks), (904) 319-0689, amccullough@nassaucountyfl.com
 - Klynt A. Farmer, District 5 (Callahan, West Yulee), (904) 570-1357, kfarmer@nassaucountyfl.com

Under Florida's public records law, emails sent to county officials regarding government business are public record.

America's Youth cont. from pg. 1

The organization's name came almost by accident. Gilbert said he set out to incorporate under a different name.

"We were gonna incorporate Dreams Incorporated, but they told me that wasn't mine," Gilbert said. "They told me it was America's Youth, and it's been America's Youth ever since. So it was



In April 1989, Mayor Ron Sapp awards John Gilbert with the first Elsie Harper Volunteer of the Year award, recognizing 20 years of volunteer youth work in Nassau County at the time.

God who put it together."

By 2013, the program had outgrown borrowed space and moved into a permanent home at 907 S. 11th St., a former Boys and Girls Club building in the neighborhood it serves.

No fees, no paid staff

America's Youth Camp America once drew as many as 60 kids in a summer and has more recently settled around 45. None of them pay a



America's Youth Camp America once drew as many as 60 kids in a summer and has more recently settled around 45. None of them pay a fee, and the organization has no paid staff.

fee, and the organization has no paid staff. Photo courtesy America's Youth

From that small beginning, America's Youth built out the programs that have defined it for a generation: the After School program, Camp America in the summer, a Community Technology Learning Center open to youth and their families, and an Entrepreneur Training Program that teaches teens how to run a small business. The organization also stepped in to run the Interfaith Dinner Network, taking it over from the Homeless Coalition after liability concerns

made the arrangement harder to sustain, Gilbert said. Local churches and volunteers supply the food, and America's Youth families get access to it.

Roughly 40 children a year, ages nine to 18, have gone through the after-school program in recent years. Camp America once drew as many as 60 kids in a summer and has more recently settled around 45. None of them pay a fee, and the organization has no paid staff.

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City of Fernandina Beach Progress
Report: Aug/Sept 2026

Submitted by Jeremiah Glisson

Welcome to this recap of recent developments and initiatives throughout our city. This report features highlights of recent progress, updates on municipal projects, and key announcements impacting our community. Providing transparency and engagement is both a privilege and a responsibility we take seriously. Your input and involvement continue to play a vital role in shaping our collective decisions and establishing priorities as we work together toward our shared goals.

Projects & Operations

The Ash Street stormwater project is complete, following months of work in the summer heat by city utilities staff. The project closes out under a change order approved by the City Commission at its Sept. 15 meeting.



Photo courtesy City of Fernandina Beach

The Florida Department of Transportation held a town hall meeting on the rehabilitation of Atlantic Avenue at the Atlantic Recreation Center. The rehab project begins Oct. 5 and takes about nine months to complete.

The downtown paid parking program remains on track to end Nov. 18. A notice of termination has been issued to One Parking, which provides parking enforcement downtown.

The city adopted its final fiscal year 2026-27 budget and millage rate at its Sept. 15 meeting. (See City News Briefs, this issue, for full coverage.)

News & Promotions

The city's Art in the Park series returned, with families gathering at the Teddy Bear Playground in Central Park for a free event open to children of all ages.

The city held its second annual Fall Festival at the Atlantic Recreation Center, featuring a sensory hour ahead of the main event and a floating pumpkin patch.

Community Highlights

The trimming and centering of the heritage tree known as Kate's Tree is complete. More than 80 heritage oaks stand throughout Amelia Island.



Photo courtesy City of Fernandina Beach

Code Enforcement staff joined Trash Talk Tuesday, helping beautify downtown while meeting with local business owners.



Photo courtesy City of Fernandina Beach

The city congratulated Nassau County on the ribbon-cutting of the Amelia Island Parkway Trail.



Photo courtesy City of Fernandina Beach

Calendar

- Sept. 4: Sounds on Centre, featuring the 7th Street Band, Front and Centre streets, 6-8 p.m.
- Sept. 10-13: Amelia Island Dance Festival, various locations including Central Park
- Sept. 27: Sunset Concert Series: Alrighy Then, Amelia River Waterfront Park, 7-9 p.m.

Quick Links:

Employment opportunities — fbfl.us/jobs
Bid openings — fbfl.us/bids

Jeremiah Glisson is the City of Fernandina Beach, Florida, Deputy City Manager.

America's Youth cont. from pg. 2

"There is no fee," Gilbert said. "It started that way because the people who were in need couldn't afford childcare, and they couldn't afford the kids to be in an after-school program. Unless somebody paid the fees, they were left out."

Gilbert has described the guiding philosophy behind the program the same way for years: keep kids busy, keep them accountable and keep them out of trouble.

"Our thing was at-risk children, building playgrounds and not jailhouses," Gilbert said.

He said the harder lesson isn't behavior, it's preparation for adulthood.

"They teach how to get along, but they don't teach them how to survive," Gilbert said. "They don't know finance. They don't know business. So what I was doing is inserting them on jobs, teaching them the proper way to run a business, with an entrepreneur program."



Photo courtesy America's Youth

John Gilbert, founder of America's Youth Inc., retired June 30.

Alumni who made it

Gilbert points to alumni as the clearest evidence the program works. Early runners went on to the national junior olympics. Others became certified nursing assistants, joined the military or graduated from Florida A&M University. One recent graduate, Passion Roberts, is headed to the University of Miami this fall, Gilbert said. Over more than 25 years, graduates of the program have gone on to become doctors, nurses, legal professionals and community leaders.

Gilbert's own record of service predates America's Youth. In April 1989, he received the first Elsie Harper Volunteer of the Year award, recognizing 20 years of volunteer youth work in Nassau County at the time.

"If I can save one kid from going astray, it's important," Gilbert said at the time.

Three decades and thousands of kids later, he still measures the work the same way.

"I had a saying: if I can save one, I think I've fulfilled my job," Gilbert has said of the program's mission. "I think I've saved more than one."

A community built on faith

America's Youth has run for most of its history without a marketing budget or paid grant writers, relying instead on churches, volunteers and word of mouth. Its annual traditions, the bookbag and school supply giveaway, the Community Christmas Party and Lighted Christmas Parade, and fundraising concerts like the 25th anniversary Drifters White Christmas show in 2023, have become fixtures in Fernandina Beach.

Gilbert has never described the work as his own doing. "You raised me," Gilbert has said, reflecting on the community that shaped him. "You sent me off to school. You sent me to a war I didn't want to go to. And I came back home because God saw fit for me to do a little more. With that, He gave me America's Youth Incorporated."

As he closes this chapter, Gilbert said his message to the community is a simple one.

"Thank you for supporting America's Youth and John Gilbert and his endeavors with the local kids," Gilbert said.

2026 RIGHT WHALE
FESTIVAL



Saturday, November 7, 2026
10am-6pm
Sunday, November 8, 2026
10am-3pm

www.RightWhaleFestival.com

Main Beach Park
32 N. Fletcher Ave.
Fernandina Beach, FL



News briefs: City of Fernandina Beach Commission

A summary of city commission meetings for September 2026

This roundup covers the commission’s Sept. 1 regular meeting, Sept. 15 workshop and Sept. 15 regular meeting.

SEPT. 1 MEETING

Paid parking reconsideration fails, 2-2

Commissioner Tim Poynter, who made the original motion to terminate the city’s paid parking contract Aug. 19, asked the commission to reconsider that decision, calling his earlier vote “irrational” and “a knee-jerk reaction.” Commissioner Joyce Tuten seconded the motion, citing the need for proper public notice on a major decision. Commissioner Genece Minshew and Vice Mayor Darron Ayscue voted against reconsideration, with Minshew saying, “I consider this done because the community has spoken.” The tie means the motion fails; paid parking remains on track to end Nov. 18, when One Parking’s contract terminates.

Stormwater utility rates overhauled, 3-1

Commissioners approved an ordinance changing how the city calculates stormwater fees, adopting a rate study that allocates costs based on rooftop area for commercial properties, with a three-year phase-in for the 14 largest commercial accounts. Utilities Director Andre Desilet said 92% of the city’s stormwater maintenance needs are tied to public infrastructure used by all residents and businesses. Several nonprofit representatives objected, including John Sauer of First Baptist Church, who said the church’s fee would rise from about \$200 to \$22,000 annually. Vice Mayor Ayscue cast the dissenting vote, saying the city failed to bring nonprofits and business stakeholders into the process early enough.

Also approved: A formal speed hump request policy, 4-0; a memorandum of understanding with the North Florida Land Trust for conservation land acquisition, 4-0, with \$240,000 set aside toward a \$980,000 initial purchase; and the reappointment of Thomas Morris to the Housing Authority, 4-0. Commissioners declined to name the Atlantic Avenue Recreation Center pool after longtime resident Louise Bowers, who died in August at 105, directing staff instead to revive a formal facility-naming policy. Commissioner Minshew was recognized for earning the Florida League of Cities’ Gold Certificate of Excellence, and the commission recognized Officer Brian Evatt’s promotion to sergeant and Lt. William Haney’s retirement after 28 years.

SEPT. 15 WORKSHOP

Final budget and millage rate adopted

Commissioners set the operating millage rate at 4.853 mills, 9.24% above the rollback rate, on a 4-1 vote with Vice Mayor Ayscue dissenting. The final budget passed 5-0. The city’s total budget across all funds is \$228 million, including \$93 million in reserves; the general fund grew from \$45 million to \$50 million. City Manager Sarah Campbell said all 30 city funds are balanced and the mandatory 20% general fund reserve requirement was met.

\$25,000 added for Nassau County Council on Aging

Commissioner Tuten moved \$25,000 from the city’s contingency fund to the nonprofit after Nassau County cut its funding. Commissioner Minshew initially asked to wait until after the November homestead exemption vote; Ayscue said he’d support the funding either way. It passed as part of the final budget.

Also noted: The city eliminated a \$700,000 marina management contract by bringing operations in-house, saving about \$60,000 while adding three full-time and seven part-time positions funded through the marina’s enterprise fund. The city is down about 21.5 tax-funded positions since fiscal year 2024-25, even as it added fee-funded roles including a new chief resiliency officer. Tuten said the city faces about \$2.3 million in added costs this year from inflation.

SEPT. 15 REGULAR MEETING

Opportunity Zone designation fails, 2-3

Commissioners rejected a resolution that would have designated a downtown census tract as a federal Opportunity Zone, which offers capital gains tax deferrals to investors. Commissioner Tuten led opposition, arguing the designation would pressure single-family homes toward teardowns and duplex conversions with no clear benefit to residents. Commissioner Minshew opposed it as well, noting the city had not gathered input from residents who actually live in the affected area. Commissioner Poynter supported the measure, calling concerns about redevelopment overstated.

Seawall phase one awarded, 5-0

Commissioners awarded a \$1,544,578.40 contract to Earth Tech Enterprises, the low bid among seven received, for the first phase of a new sea wall along the waterfront near the



Photo courtesy City of Fernandina Beach
From left, Commissioners Darron Ayscue, Joyce Tuten, James Antun, Genece Minshew and Tim Poynter.

WHEN & WHERE THEY MEET

1st and 3rd Tuesday, 6 p.m., workshop at 5 p.m.
Special meetings as needed

City Hall
204 Ash Street, Fernandina Beach

Public invited to attend

CONTACT YOUR COMMISSIONER

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park. The project includes street reconfiguration and culvert replacement and came in well under the original estimate of more than \$2 million. Commissioner Tuten noted the city has seen nine inches of sea level rise since the Industrial Revolution and is projected to see roughly 45 days of high-tide “sunny day” flooding annually by 2050.

Fee waivers draw dissent on two event agreements

Commissioners approved a three-year franchise agreement for Dickens on Center, including about \$47,660 a year in fee waivers, on a 4-1 vote, and a 2026-27 slate of five co-sponsored events — Sounds on Center, Hometown Fourth of July, Shrimp Drop, Eight Flags Car Show and the Black Friday Pajama Party — representing about \$43,387 in combined waivers across 10 events, also 4-1. Commissioner Minshew dissented on both, saying the city has not seriously examined whether it recoups that value and citing more than \$150,000 in annual fee waivers across the city’s event agreements. Other commissioners said the events bring significant economic activity and goodwill to the city.

Also approved, all 5-0: Design work orders totaling \$274,450 with Passero Associates for the Brett’s project, covering boardwalk relocation, dredge field expansion and fuel system work; a not-to-exceed \$350,000 change order for the Area 6/Ash Street stormwater project; and three ordinances on second reading — the master fee schedule, a boards and commissions code cleanup, and the city’s pay and classification plan.

Park redesign, ordinance cleanup discussed

Commissioners voiced broad support for a two-field redesign of the Martin Luther King Jr. Park ballfields, following extensive community input; no formal vote was required. The city attorney also raised codifying the citizens’ initiative process (the mechanism behind the paid parking referendum) into city code; Vice Mayor Ayscue objected to revising it, preferring it move into the city charter instead.

For coverage of these meetings and more, visit NassauNewsLine.com.

October

Community Calendar

What's Happening in Nassau County

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email Editor@NassauNewsLine.net

Oct. 3 Island Hop Craft Beer & Spirits Fest

Fernandina Beach Main Street hosts a craft beer, wine and spirits tasting festival with live music and food trucks. Saturday, Oct. 3, VIP admission noon, general admission 1 p.m., Central Park, Fernandina Beach. Visit islandhop-craftbeerfest.com for tickets

Oct. 4 - 11 Les DeMerle Amelia Island Jazz Festival

The 23rd annual Les DeMerle Amelia Island Jazz Festival brings a week of jazz performances to venues across Fernandina Beach. Visit ameliaisland-jazzfestival.com for the schedule and tickets.

Oct. 6 Before You Vote: Get the Facts on Amendment 3

Friends of the Fernandina Beach Library hosts a forum on how Amendment 3 could affect library funding, featuring City Manager Sarah Campbell and Commissioner Alyson McCullough. Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2 to 4 p.m., Fernandina Beach Public Library Community Room. Visit fernandinafol.org for details.

Oct. 7 "The Librarians" documentary screening

Story & Song Center for Arts & Culture hosts a free screening of "The Librarians," a documentary on library funding restrictions nationwide. Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2 to 4 p.m., Story & Song Center for Arts & Culture. Free; no RSVP required. Donations benefit Friends of the Library.

Oct. 7 Brown Bag Lunch Lecture Series

Amelia Island Museum of History

hosts its monthly free lecture on local history. Wednesday, Oct. 7, noon, Baker Hall, Amelia Island Museum of History, Fernandina Beach. Visit ameliamuseum.org for details.

Oct. 8 - 18 Northeast Florida Fair

The 79th annual Northeast Florida Fair returns to the Callahan fairgrounds with rides, livestock shows and live entertainment. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$7 for youth, military and seniors, and free for children 5 and under. Visit neffair.org for tickets.

Oct. 10 - 11 Amelia Island Half Marathon Weekend

Capstone Event Group hosts a Light-house Loop 5K and half marathon and 12K weekend. Saturday, Oct. 10, 5K at 5 p.m.; Sunday, Oct. 11, half marathon and 12K at 7:20 a.m., Main Beach Park, Fernandina Beach. Visit ameliaisland-half.com for registration.

Oct. 10 Graveside Chronicles: Tales of Life, Love and Legacy

Amelia Island Museum of History and the Amelia Island Genealogical Society host guided tours of Bosque Bello Cemetery featuring costumed interpreters. Saturday, Oct. 10, tours from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Bosque Bello Cemetery. Timed tickets required online at ameliamuseum.org.

Oct. 10 5th Annual Amelia Island Hispanic Heritage Music and Food Festival

Friends of Fernandina Skate Park hosts live music, food vendors and a dominoes competition celebrating Hispanic culture in Nassau County. Saturday, Oct. 10, 1 to 9 p.m., downtown Fernandina Beach, S. 3rd St. Visit friendsofferinandinaskatepark.com for details.

Oct. 15 Halloween Costume Exchange

Hilliard Branch Library hosts a costume swap; donors who dropped off gently used costumes Aug. 1 through Oct. 9 can trade their tickets for a "new-to-you" costume. Leftover costumes will be donated to local families. Thursday, Oct. 15, 5 to 7 p.m., Hilliard Branch Library, 15821 County Road 108, Hilliard. Call (904) 530-6500, option 4, for details.

Oct. 16 The Plot Thickens: Yulee Library Book Club

Yulee Branch Library's book club, which meets the third Friday of each month, discusses "Hour of the Witch" by Chris Bohjalian. New members welcome. Friday, Oct. 16, 11 a.m. to noon, upstairs at Publix at Wildlight, 76010 William Burgess Blvd., Yulee. Visit nassaureads.com or call (904) 530-6500 for details.

Oct. 16 3rd on 3rd Lecture Series

Amelia Island Museum of History hosts its monthly after-hours lecture on local history. Friday, Oct. 16, 6 p.m., Amelia Island Museum of History, Fernandina Beach. Free for members; \$5 for non-members. Visit ameliamuseum.org for details.

Oct. 17 Amelia Island Walk for Water

A 3-mile fundraising walk supports clean water access for communities in need through Water Mission. Saturday, Oct. 17, event opens 8:30 a.m., walk begins 9:30 a.m., Central Park, Fernandina Beach. Visit walkforwater.rallybound.org to register.

Oct. 17 30th Annual 8-Flags Car Show

The Amelia Cruizers host classic, antique and specialty vehicles

along historic Centre Street. Saturday, Oct. 17, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Centre Street, Fernandina Beach. Pre-registration required at ameliacruizers.org.

Oct. 26 Fall Book Swap

Friends of the Fernandina Beach Library hosts a book swap; bring up to five books to trade. Monday, Oct. 26, 4:30 to 6 p.m., Mocama Brewing Company, Fernandina Beach. Free for FOL members; \$5 for non-members. RSVP at fernandinafol.org.

Oct. 31 SIWD Foundation Halloween Bash

A free, family-friendly Halloween celebration for all ages and abilities features a chili cook-off, costume contest and food trucks. Saturday, Oct. 31, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Callahan Fairgrounds. Contact (904) 530-6150 for details.

ONGOING ACTIVITIES

Fernandina Beach Market Place

Produce, baked goods and local products from area farmers and makers. Every Saturday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., N. 7th Street, Fernandina Beach.

Nassau County Council on Aging

Monthly class schedule for seniors, featuring fitness, yoga, arts and technology workshops. Visit nassaucountycouncilonaging.org/event-calendar or call 904-261-0701 for details.

A Fine Art Sale

Island Art Association with Luna Fine Art Gallery presents a fine art sale through the end of the year, benefiting IAA programs. Courtyard by Marriott, 2700 Atlantic Ave., Amelia Island. Visit lunafineart.org.

For additional events throughout the week, visit www.NassauNewsLine.com

The perils of one margarita

When it comes to rites of passage, college is often a crash course. Most co-eds quickly discover how to party like a pro, the subsequent agony of an 8 a.m. class, and the collateral horsepower of caffeine.

College is rife with frat fêtes, dorm bashes and college town pub crawls ... unless of course, you attended fashion school in Manhattan like Moi — no Greek life, no campus, no tailgating.

Instead, you perfect your taxi hail, learn to sniff out a sample sale, and arrive late for lectures because you happened upon a "Sex and the City" shoot. (Naturally, priorities shifted.)

Due to my atypical undergrad experience, I never quite developed a palate (or a tolerance) for alcohol. Despite sojourns to Napa Valley and the vineyards of Italy, I remain a 40-year-old lightweight.

During nightly "wine time" with my Island neighbors, I too would like to wind down with



Jennifer Silverman
The Curious Columnist

a glass of wine. Alas, most alcohol is wasted on me; my taste is akin to that of a high-schooler swilling Malibu Bay Breeze.

Nonetheless, for the past few years, I have been sampling a variety of alcoholic beverages in the hopes something might stick. My latest acquisition was a blueberry-apple hard cider. After sipping a portion, I opted to return to the same bottle the following night. (The fact that hard cider is carbonated escaped me — one swig of completely flat, leftover cider was decidedly unpleasant.)

Taking pity on me, one of my neighbors kindly offered to concoct a custom margarita — designed for a novice who prefers her adult beverages to taste like juice. After a few hearty sips, my every utterance suddenly struck me as downright hilarious, and a grand time was had by all. I finished my margarita, and my neighbors saw me home.

A few minutes later, the euphoria had faded, replaced with overwhelming queasiness. After five episodes of "The Golden Girls," I finally drifted off to sleep.

An hour or so later, still in my margarita-induced stupor, I was awakened by a strange siren. Fumbling around for my phone, I realized my home security alarm was blaring.

Before it occurred to me to panic, I was initially amused that my alarm system would wail on the one night I was arguably tipsy. Then it dawned on me, if my burglar alarm was going off, there must be a burglar. My slowly moving mind promptly assembled a montage of masked horror movie bad guys wielding machetes.

The only action that made sense in the moment was to silence the deafening clamor. Phone in hand, I turned off the alarm remotely, overconfident that I could summon the police with the tap of a button in my security app.

Frozen at my bedroom door, silently cursing that one margarita, I glanced down at my canine companion, Petunia. A prissy Westie who fancies herself a vicious Doberman, she timidly peered out from behind me. Her usual "let me at 'em!" attitude had morphed into an uncharacteristically polite, "After you."

Still not clear-headed, I unwisely ventured downstairs, convinced I'd find a machete where

no machete had any business being. Strangely, everything was exactly as I left it — nothing was disturbed.

Perplexed, I headed to the back door to investigate and noticed something on the floor. It was the alarm sensor. Apparently, after I replaced the battery a few days earlier, the sensor was no longer properly secured. It had fallen off the wall and tripped the alarm. No machete man.

As Petunia and I heaved a collective sigh of relief, I poured myself a ginger ale and turned on another episode of "The Golden Girls" to lull us back to sleep.

Surely, "non-margarita me" would have handled the situation with far more caution. Fortunately, the only slasher lurking was the one in my head. (No more margaritas for yours truly.)

Jennifer Silverman is a lifestyle writer and celebrity wardrobe stylist who has dressed hundreds of television personalities and professional athletes. Some of her favorite styling projects include the Olympic Games, the World Cup and the Oscars. A Kentucky native, she and her spirited Westie, Petunia, traded Manhattan for Amelia Island in 2019. She launched The Curious Columnist in 2022 and most recently wrote for Business Insider. More quirky commentary awaits at CuriousColumnist.com. Email her at Jennifer@CuriousColumnist.com.

News briefs: Nassau County Board of County Commissioners

A summary of county commission meetings for September 2026

WHEN & WHERE THEY MEET

2nd & 4th Monday, 5 p.m.
3rd Wednesday, 9 a.m.
Special meetings as needed

James S. Page Governmental Complex
96135 Nassau Pl., Yulee

Public invited to attend

This roundup covers the board’s Sept. 14 and Sept. 16 meetings. Nassau County commissioners took up a record conservation land purchase, a major health care grant, utility restructuring, a resolution supporting the region’s shrimping industry and several land use and infrastructure items.



Photo courtesy Nassau County Board of County Commissioners
From left, Commissioners Klynt Farmer, John Martin, A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann, Jeff Gray and Alyson McCullough.

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SEPT. 14 MEETING

Library funding cuts draw pushback ahead of final vote

Commissioners approved a tentative \$452.8 million budget that closes the Bryceville library, cuts the Yulee branch to three days a week and eliminates county funding for nonprofits, drawing more than a half-dozen speakers who urged the board to restore funding before the Sept. 28 final hearing. Angie Hall, president of the Friends of the Bryceville Branch Library, said the branch’s circulation is up 90% over the past three years, telling commissioners a library “is more than just books.” Nancy Bowyer, president of the Friends of the Yulee Library, asked the board “to use wise planning to restore the Yulee branch to a five-day week.” For full coverage, see the related story elsewhere in this issue.

Utility Authority created

Commissioners voted 5-0 to create the Northeast Florida Utility Authority, a new special dependent district modeled on the former American Beach Utility District. Executive Director Colin Groff said the authority will give the county a framework to coordinate utility development tied to growth, negotiate future utility contracts and manage funds restricted to utility uses in a more businesslike fashion. The board separately approved a special revenue fund to hold utility-sourced revenue ahead of the new authority’s operation.

Electric franchise agreements renewed

The board renewed 6% electric franchise agreements with Florida Power & Light, Florida Public Utilities and Okefenokee Rural Electric Membership Corporation, continuing arrangements first established in 1987. Commissioners also adopted a master plan to underground and harden power infrastructure along the State Road 200/A1A corridor in partnership with FPL.

Land use amendment approved for East Nassau

Commissioners approved a future land use map amendment for the southern planning area of the East Nassau Community Planning Area, shifting about 333 acres from employment center to suburban residential use while increasing conservation habitat land by 13 acres. The area’s overall entitlement of 24,000 dwelling units is unchanged.

Residents press board on data center transparency

During public comment, members of a citizens group studying data center development asked the board to prohibit county staff from entering nondisclosure agreements with data center, cryptocurrency or data mining developers. Chadd Charland, who helped draft the group’s recommendations, said that while he does not believe the board has struck secret deals with data center developers, “a large percentage of residents in Nassau County believe you all have done the same.” Commissioners Martin and Farmer both said they had not signed and would not sign such agreements. County Attorney Denise May said neither the board nor staff currently enter into them, though the county’s economic development agency has limited statutory confidentiality authority for economic development prospects.

Also approved: A proclamation honoring Nassau County’s Vietnam veterans, presented to members of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1088; a \$1.2 million continuing contract with TRP Construction Group for pavement marking services; a \$5,081,280 extension of the county’s tourism marketing services contract with Starmark International; a mobility donation and credit agreement with Liberty Cove Nassau LLC for construction of Liberty Cove phase two mobility improvements, valued at about \$3.38 million in construction and \$470,000 in donated property; up to \$4.3 million in tourist development tax funds for the city of Fernandina Beach’s beachfront branding and Seaside Park improvement project; annual maintenance and capital assessment resolutions for the South Amelia Island Shore Stabilization beach renourishment area; and the annual Amelia Concourse assessment roll, unchanged at \$45 per unit. Commissioner John Martin returned to in-person meetings after

a summer health absence, and Commissioner A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann welcomed his son, Capt. Eric Huppmann, home from a months-long military deployment.

SEPT. 16 MEETING

County acquires 207 acres in largest CLAM deal to date

Commissioners approved a \$3,591,742.29 purchase of approximately 207.32 acres on Mentoria Road from Radiant LLC for conservation, the largest single acquisition yet under the county’s Conservation Lands Acquisition and Management (CLAM) program. The property, part of the William Burgess Overlay District, will connect to a planned linear park system running from Nassau Crossing south to the river. It is part of a roughly 400-acre joint conservation project with landowner Rayonier, which is placing the remainder of the tract into a conservation easement under a stewardship district, splitting long-term management responsibilities between the two parties. Deputy County Manager and County Engineer Robert Companion said the acquisition would provide permanent public access to the river and marsh in an area that currently has none. Commissioner John Martin said he’d “love to see this on the front page of the newspaper.”

Three more CLAM properties approved

The board also approved three smaller CLAM acquisitions: 45.7 acres along Lofton Creek for \$205,000, which conservation staff said helps protect water quality and wildlife corridors along the Nassau River/St. Johns River Marshes Aquatic Preserve; a 1.29-acre addition to the Piney Island Viewshed for \$250,000; and the southern portion of a parcel behind Yulee Methodist Church for \$59,000, tied to a planned Christian Way road extension. Commissioner Jeff Gray thanked Director of Strategic Advancement Brandy Carvalho for her work on the Lofton Creek acquisition, and Commissioner A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann credited the county’s CLAM committee and staff for what he called a model conservation program being emulated by other Florida counties.

Third parcel purchased for Yulee Sports Complex expansion

Commissioners approved a \$130,000 purchase of an improved parcel at 86071 Pages Dairy Road from William C. Clardy Jr., the third property acquired this year to expand the Yulee Sports Complex and support future ballpark expansion.

\$1.3 million grant to expand health care access

Florida Department of Health officer Cara Gluck told the board Nassau County will receive more than \$1.3 million as part of an \$18.5 million Rural Health Transformation grant awarded to Northeast Florida through the nonprofit Community Health Information Technology (COMHIT), a sub-award of a larger \$43 million-plus statewide initiative funded through the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the state’s Agency for Health Care Administration. Gluck said Nassau County was identified as a model site for the initiative, which brings together the health department, Starting Point Behavioral Health, Angel Kids Pediatrics, Acadian Health, Hilliard Pharmacy and Telescope Health to expand prenatal, behavioral health, pediatric behavioral health, mobile integrated health, pharmacy and telehealth services for residents, with a hub planned at Hilliard Pharmacy. State and federal officials were scheduled to tour project sites in the county Sept. 22.

Board backs resolution supporting shrimping industry

John Steele, representing the Isle of Eight Flags Shrimp Festival executive board, asked commissioners to pass a resolution supporting the federal Save Our Shrimpers Act, which would restrict the use of taxpayer dollars to support foreign shrimp farming, processing or



Q&A with Nassau County Commissioner A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann

Q: The board’s decision to reduce library services, closing Bryceville and cutting Yulee hours, drew a lot of pushback this fall. Can you walk through the reasoning?

A: When you look across the whole library system, not just one location, the studies supported the decisions we made. Bryceville is tiny, basically the size of my kitchen, and Callahan, a full-service library, is about 14 minutes away, so it made sense fiscally to shift those services there. Yulee is different: that library sits on the FSCJ campus, and our lease fee there basically doubled, so we reduced hours to align with actual usage. We’re not closing that location. Ideally, I’d love to see a standalone library in Yulee down the road, since that community is growing fast, but that’s a multi-year process for a pay-as-you-go county. I know these weren’t popular decisions, but they kept the budget balanced.

Q: The county also cut nonprofit funding this year. What’s behind that?

A: Nonprofits have to be able to stand on their own. We used to focus that funding on organizations tied directly to a county service. Council on Aging was an easy case when they ran Nassau Transit. Once that moved to JTA, the argument got a lot harder. I get emails asking why we’re picking winners and losers with taxpayer money, and I think that’s fair. My own wife works for a nonprofit, and I’ve told her that organization needs to plan on standing alone, since the state’s made clear there’s less room for that in local budgets going forward. Churches and individuals need to step up directly, not as a handout, but a hand up.

Q: What’s the plan for a new animal shelter, and why does it carry such a high price tag?

A: Our current shelter is 30 years old and well beyond its lifespan. We’ve been setting aside about \$2 million a year to build something modern, more retail-facing, with a park around it, so animals move through faster and families are more likely to adopt. The price tag is \$20 million to \$30 million, which sounds steep, but



A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann

St. Johns County just built a basic shelter with none of those amenities for \$22 million, so we’re not far off market rate. We’re including on-site veterinary care too, and saving in cash rather than borrowing, so we’re not putting that debt on future generations.

Q: The board approved a record \$3.6 million conservation purchase in September. What’s the bigger picture behind the CLAM program?

A: CLAM is a citizen-led board, not the county throwing darts at a map. They’ve built a ranked list of the top 25 priority properties over years of study, and voters approved a bond so we’d have money ready when a willing seller comes along. It’s a huge win, and it’s being modeled by other counties now. People say “don’t develop that land,” but somebody has to actually buy it to protect it. CLAM is a big part of carrying out Vision 2050, keeping a connected greenway of conservation land intact. The next frontier is west of I-95, where ag land is increasingly at risk as the state makes it easier to convert to residential.

Q: With Amendment 3 potentially cutting the county’s ad valorem revenue by close to a third, how is the county preparing?

A: We’re looking at roughly a \$30 million reduction to next year’s budget if it passes. I’m all for lower property taxes. I’m a homeowner too, and I’ve watched my own taxes climb over 20 years. But the cost of providing services has climbed right along with inflation; a mile of road used to cost a million dollars, now it’s \$3 to \$5 million. We have to be ready to pivot, because if we can’t pay for something, we can’t provide it. We’re already working on ways to show residents exactly what their tax dollars fund, service by service, so people can see where the money goes before the vote in November.

A.M. “Hupp” Huppmann represents District 2. Questions or comments can be directed to him at ahuppmann@nassaucountyfl.com or (904) 319-0686.



Q&A with Nassau County Commissioner Jeff Gray

Q: Where does Nassau County stand on data centers?

A: We’re currently in a temporary moratorium on data center development, adopted June 8, 2026, for up to 12 months. That gives the county time to gather information and evaluate potential impacts before we consider any future policies or regulations. The Board of County Commissioners established a Fact-Finding Committee of senior county staff, which held seven publicly noticed workshops in June with subject-matter experts on a range of environmental, economic and infrastructure issues, plus opportunities for public comment. The committee is now compiling a report for the board, and we’ll consider the findings and policy options at a future meeting, which will be publicly advertised in advance.

Q: What progress has the county made on affordable housing?

A: We’ve continued expanding and preserving affordable housing through the State Housing Initiatives Partnership, or SHIP, Program. Over the last two fiscal years, the program has assisted residents through three demolition and reconstruction projects, one emergency repair, four down payment assistance projects and two owner-occupied rehabilitation projects. The county won a 2026 SHIP Award in August for its work in rehabilitation, purchase assistance and new construction. We’re also working with a developer on plans to construct affordable rental housing, expanding the range of housing opportunities for residents.

Q: What’s happening with conservation land acquisition?

A: We continue to prioritize conservation through our Conservation Lands Acquisition and Management Program, known as CLAM, established in 2021 and supported by a \$30 million bond referendum voters approved in 2022. Since it began, the county has acquired or protected more than 642 acres, including the roughly 42-acre Piney Island Viewshed, our first CLAM acquisition, and approximately 599 acres protected through the St. Marys Farm conservation easement. We’ve also partnered with the city of Fernandina Beach on the Greenway Trail Extension, acquiring



Jeff Gray

about an acre of property adjacent to the Ron Sapp Egans Creek Greenway. The parcel includes undeveloped maritime hammock and connects to existing conservation lands, and the city will manage and maintain it through an interlocal agreement. At our Sept. 16 meeting, the board approved acquisition of three more properties totaling 51.6 acres: 45.7 acres along Lofton Creek, 4.6 acres behind Yulee Methodist Church, and 1.3 acres added onto the Piney Island Viewshed.

Q: What transportation improvements have come to District 3 this year?

A: It’s been a significant year for connectivity in the Yulee area. The William Burgess Boulevard Extension project reached several milestones in July, including a new roundabout at Theresa Road, the ribbon cutting for Hornets Drive connecting U.S. 17 and Miner Road, and a new traffic signal at U.S. 17 and William Burgess Boulevard. Together, these improvements are designed to improve traffic flow and reduce congestion, particularly around the Yulee Middle and Yulee High School area. We also opened a new roundabout at Heron Isles Parkway, Chester Road and River Bluff Parkway, providing an additional east-west connection beyond State Road 200 and serving as an entrance to Wildlight’s Garden District.

Q: What’s new with parks and recreation?

A: One of the biggest additions this year was Westside Regional Park in Hilliard, which opened to the public June 6. The 150-acre park features athletic fields, a large playground, a 7-acre fishing pond, a dog park, walking trails, an amphitheater, an airnasium and a stargazing area, along with new kayak rentals and pavilion space for private events. In Yulee, we’ve obtained additional properties to support future expansion of the Yulee Ballpark and Eastside Regional Park as the community grows. Blackrock Park and Liberty Park are also in the works, both developed through public-private partnerships, with plans for pickleball courts, walking paths and, eventually, an 11-acre waterfront park at Liberty Park.

Jeff Gray represents District 3 on the Nassau County Board of County Commissioners. Questions or comments can be directed to him at jgray@nassaucountyfl.com or (904) 570-1946.

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Nassau County Board of County Commissioners cont. from pg. 6

exporting to the U.S. Steele said companion bills in the U.S. Senate have bipartisan support but remain in committee, and that other coastal communities, including Biloxi, Mississippi, have already passed similar resolutions. Commissioners gave county staff direction to work with Steele and the Southern Shrimp Alliance on drafting a resolution to bring back to the board, and Commissioner Huppmann said he would also connect Steele with the Northeast Florida Regional Council, which has studied the issue.

Ordinance changes preview EMS, vending and beach parking updates

County staff previewed several “glitch” amendments to special events and recreation ordinances, expected to return for formal adoption at the board’s Oct. 12 meeting. The changes would allow mobile food vending at any county-approved event rather than only county-sponsored events; roll back required EMS and law enforcement staffing ratios for outdoor festivals to the original 250-to-1 level, after staff found the current ratios were far higher than comparable requirements in Clay and Duval counties; and revert beachfront parking lot hours to 24 hours a day, apart from a 3-4 a.m. closure window for cleaning and security, undoing an unintended side effect of a 2025 ordinance change that had also blocked access for night fishing and stargazing.

Commissioner floats “satellite library” concept

During commissioner comments, Commissioner Klynt Farmer said he is in early discussions with County Manager Taco Pope about a potential “satellite library” program that would use existing county facilities in underserved areas to offer book checkout, internet access and quiet study space at low cost, which he described as a possible way to help address needs in areas affected by recent library service reductions.

Also approved: Recognition of county employees Margie Drawdy and Tony Lombardi for 25 years of service each; a one-year extension of a ditch maintenance contract with Jacks Utilities Management; and a contract with Enviromatic Systems for HVAC and access control maintenance at the historic courthouse.

For full coverage of these meetings and more Nassau County news, visit NassauNewsLine.com.

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Treasures of a Local Public Library

- Helpful library staff
- Resources
- Events/Programs for all ages
- Groups – Friends of the Library, knitting club, book club

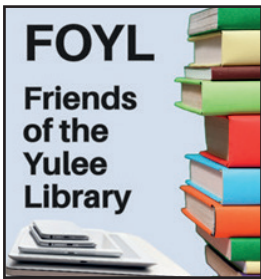
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- Computer use / internet/ printing
- Board games and puzzles
- Birding/nature backpack kit
- Meeting room
- Study space
- Large-print books
- Equipment for scanning and converting media to digital
- Passport assistance

Social media

Patty said: A public library is a sign a community is invested in learning and enrichment of its citizens.

Kris said: Public libraries educate, inform and connect.



Statistics

Stat: Over 75,000 Nassau County residents have a library card.

Stat: So far this FY 2026, the number of new library cards issued exceeds 2800.

Stat: So far this FY 2026, checkout of print items is well over three times the use of electronic books (e-books and audiobooks).

