

Thumbs up, thumbs down: Judging Brevard's winners and losers

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Thumbs down: To former Clerk of Courts Mitch Needelman for ramrodding an \$8.6 million contract with a document-scanning firm —revealed in court as one of the most irregular and ill-advised purchases we’ve seen in Brevard government. And thumbs

way up to current Clerk of Courts Scott Ellis for suing to invalidate it. Records show Needelman’s team let then-potential contractor Blue Gem LLC effectively write the bidding specs; ignored attorneys’ warnings of an office “insider” who might benefit from the deal; violated Sunshine laws during negotiations; then awarded the contract to the highest bidder. After he lost re-election, Needelman borrowed \$6.1 million on taxpayers’ behalf and paid off Blue Gem before leaving office, with only fraction of the work done. How’s that for public service?

Thumbs up: To state Rep. Ritch Workman, R-Melbourne, for seeking reasonable restrictions on the use of remote-controlled drone aircraft in Florida. His House bill would require police and other officials to obtain warrants, as they would wiretaps, before using drones for surveillance. Federal officials would have to cite a credible terrorist threat. Otherwise, Florida companies and agencies could research and develop drones for peaceful civilian uses. Brevard needs that work.

Thumbs down: To state Rep. John Tobia, R-Melbourne Beach, who is sponsoring a bill that would keep the names of state university presidential candidates confidential until 21 days before a selection committee votes on them. Florida has conducted open presidential searches for 46 years, allowing the public to view the process from beginning to end —and doesn’t suffer for lack of great candidates. Tobia cited a 2004 report that showed more candidates applied for university-president positions in states where the names were kept confidential until just before a vote.

Thumbs up: To Mary Horton, a home-schooled 12-year-old from West Melbourne who won the Central Florida spelling bee last week, earning a spot in the national competition in Washington, D.C., in late May. To prepare for the national bee, she says she’ll be “studying a lot of hard words.”

Thumbs down: To Judge Carlos Samour of Colorado who has ordered a FoxNews.com reporter to face possible questioning in court, under threat of jail, about who leaked news of the notebook Aurora shooter James Holmes sent to his psychiatrist. Holmes' attorneys want Winter to reveal who may have violated a gag order, since no police detectives have confessed. Talk about trampling the First Amendment. Thankfully, Florida's "shield law" protects journalists from having to reveal anonymous sources.

Thumbs up: To state House and Senate budget writers who plan to more than reverse past cuts to public education and grow per-pupil spending next year by about 6 percent. Of the \$1 billion increase under the House bill, \$676 million would be set aside for employee raises, with half of it dedicated to merit-based raises for teachers. "If you look at our budget and say, 'Who is the big winner?' the big winner is education," Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, told the Orlando Sentinel.

Thumbs down: To the city council in Nelson, Ga., a city of 1,300 people north of Atlanta, which voted unanimously Monday night to require every household to own a firearm and ammunition. The proposal is similar to a law in nearby Kennesaw, which has been on the books for 31 years. While the Second Amendment gives people the right to arm themselves, it doesn't require them to do so.

Thumbs up: To Brevard Circuit Court Judge Charlie Roberts, who took 90-year-old Leroy Foster on a successful turkey hunt during the state's spring gobbler season last month. Foster, who lives in an assisted-living facility in Palm Bay, downed a 20-pound gobbler. This isn't the first time Roberts has taken Foster under his wing for a hunt. Last year, Foster downed another 20-pound turkey with Roberts at his side. The pair hunt on the Kempfer Ranch, west of Melbourne, which is leased by the Melbourne Hunting and Fishing Club.