N.O. East residents make plea for annex

Mayor, leaders listen to request for municipal services

BY VIOLET BUCARO
Staff writer

Residents packed into a New Orleans East meeting Tuesday night to urge Mayor Helena Moreno and city leaders to bring more municipal services to their area of town by bringing a City Hall annex there.

People who live in the East are forced to make long trips downtown to get things done, several residents said, and a City Hall annex would boost local development and business, giving the area the economic shot in the arm it needs.

"It is our time for New Orleans East to shine," resident Nga Vu said at the meeting at Greater St. Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church on Read Boulevard, where more than 100 people gathered. "That is not going to happen if we don't create jobs and keep our children here. … Let's build a state-of-the-art government complex."

The Tuesday night meeting was the second in recent months where residents have urged leaders to put a City Hall annex in their neighborhood. It was the first time, however, that members of a Municipal Complex Advisory Committee were present to directly hear residents' concerns, alongside the East New Orleans Neighborhood Advisory Commission.

Melika Honoré, the owner of The Verdict Restaurant & Lounge in New Orleans East, complained that business owners must take hourlong trips downtown to get their required licenses and permits from City Hall.

"That's not equal access to this amazing government. I want this annex to be a real City Hall presence, not a satellite," she said. "The annex also means foot traffic and investing in businesses."

The crowd cheered when Moreno said she supported including a Department of Safety and Permits office in a New Orleans East annex, making it easier to do business there. "District D has been forgotten," she said. "That ends with my administration."

The lack of development in New Orleans East can partially be traced to an oil bust in the 1980s that led to major business and local job loss. Natural disasters also caused infrastructure blight, requiring expensive upgrades and long-term investment. Commercial investors and retailers have headed to surrounding cities.

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STAFF PHOTOS BY BRETT DUKE

A train crosses Central Avenue in Jefferson on Tuesday. The upcoming Move Jefferson app will alert drivers to approaching trains at six railroad crossings in the parish.

Track the train traffic with 'Moving Jefferson' app

Expanded tool will include more railroad crossings, live camera feed

BY LARA NICHOLSON
Staff writer

Drivers across Metairie and Kenner will soon be able to plan their daily commutes around train blockages at popular intersections, thanks to a major overhaul of a train-tracking app that Jefferson Parish officials announced Tuesday.

The app will add train traffic information for five railroad crossings: North Labarre Road, Central Avenue, Little Farms Avenue,

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Jefferson Parish Council member Jennifer Van Vrancken speaks about the upcoming Move Jefferson app in Metairie on Tuesday. The app will provide live camera feeds of several train crossings.

Orleans DA reinstates staffer

Friedman had been terminated following criticism of budget plan

BY MATT BRUCE
Staff writer

Former City Council candidate Holly Friedman has returned to work at District Attorney Jason Williams' office, less than two months after the city's top prosecutor terminated her in what she called "retaliation" for her public criticism of Mayor Helena Moreno's plan to increase property taxes.

Friedman said she was "reinstated" Nov. 4 to her post of three years, managing a litigation support team that helps prosecutors prepare trial exhibits.



Friedman

She said the return to the district attorney's staff came under confidential terms with Williams, who did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday.

"I'm glad to have been reinstated," Friedman said in a statement. "I've always been proud of my work at the District Attorney's Office, and I never believed my dismissal was warranted. Reinstatement feels like vindication and is an important step in restoring my professional reputation."

Friedman was removed from the full-time position Sept. 17, days after she questioned Moreno's budget plan on Facebook and appeared in a local TV news report calling out a proposed $42 million "roll forward" millage. Friedman described it as a hidden tax hike.

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Legal troubles mount further for embattled CivicSource owner

Barrios accused of attempting to influence accountant

BY BEN MYERS
Staff writer

Legal troubles continued to mount for the embattled owner of an online property auction company on Tuesday, after a Civil District Court judge sanctioned him for improperly contacting a court-appointed expert in ongoing litigation with the city of New Orleans.



Barrios

Judge Monique Barial ordered Bryan Barrios to perform eight hours of community service after Barrios repeatedly emailed and showed up at the office of a forensic accountant tasked with sorting

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Jury weighs lawsuit alleging student's rights were violated

Child with disability handcuffed, put in chokehold

BY ELYSE CARMOSINO
Staff writer

A jury will soon decide whether a Jefferson Parish student's rights were violated in 2021 when sheriff's deputies handcuffed the 10-year-old, who has a behavior disorder, and put him in a chokehold after he struck his school's principal.

The boy's parents, Terry Harper and Ashley Hutchinson Harper, sued the Jefferson Parish School Board and Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office in 2022. The family argues that employees at Congetta Trippe Janet Elementary School in Marrero did not do enough to deescalate the situation, and that officers used unnecessary force on the boy, who has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder.

The seven-juror trial began last week in U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Louisiana in New Orleans.

Representatives for the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office did not return a request for comment. Kaela Lewis, a spokesperson for Jefferson Parish schools, said the district does not comment on pending litigation. In court filings, the School Board and Sheriff's Office argue that staffers and law enforcement acted appropriately.

The family, which is represented by attorneys from the Tulane Law Clinic and the Louisiana ACLU, argue in the lawsuit that the incident highlights disparities in school discipline. Noting that the student is Black, the suit

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Officials: Man falsely told crew he had bomb

BY MICHELLE HUNTER
Staff writer

A New York man aboard a flight headed to Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport on Monday night falsely told crew members he had a bomb and was later arrested, according to the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office.

Rony Gomez Alberto, 34, began acting irrationally while on a United Airlines flight about 11:20 p.m., including informing the crew that he had a bomb, said Sgt. Brandon Veal, spokesperson for the Sheriff's Office.

The plane arrived safely, and Gomez was taken into custody without incident, officials said. He was booked into the Jefferson Parish jail on a count of communication of false information of planned arson and terrorizing.

Gomez was being held without bail Tuesday at the Jefferson Parish Correctional Center in Gretna.

Staff writer Marco Cartolano contributed to this report.

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STAFFER

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At the time, Friedman said she was surprised by the "unnecessary" move to fire her, saying she'd never received a complaint or negative performance review.

She claimed she was unaware of a District Attorney's Office's policy prohibiting staff members from speaking to media. Friedman said her posts weren't political or targeting any elected officials; she said she was simply trying to inform residents about Moreno's plan to close the city budget gap by shoring up tax revenue.

Last week, the City Council unanimously approved Moreno's "roll forward" plan, attached to a $23 million property tax increase that is poised to cover a portion of the city's $77 million budget hole.

Friedman was a previously a staff member for former City Council member Joe Giarrusso. She ran for Giarrusso's District A seat when he left to become Moreno's chief administrative officer. Friedman lost in a runoff last year to Aimee McCarron, Giarrusso's ex-policy and budget director.

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STUDENT

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cites data from Jefferson Parish in 2018 showing that Black students with disabilities were referred to law enforcement at a disproportionately high rate.

Last year, Louisiana tightened restrictions on restraining students with disabilities and placing them in seclusion following a 2024 audit that found the state had failed to adequately monitor the practices, despite warnings they could endanger students and violate their rights.

In court Monday, jurors were shown videos of the incident that triggered the law enforcement response. In May 2021, the boy, referred to in the suit as JH, punched principal Karen Doyle in the jaw before running out of her office and throwing a trash can at a school window, the videos show.

Attorneys for the family say the videos do not capture what happened next. According to the lawsuit, four deputies arrived, including Sgt. Steven Trapani, who allegedly put JH in a chokehold. Deputies then cuffed the boy's hands behind his back and questioned him in a room alone for 90 minutes while administrators forced his parents to wait outside the school, the lawsuit states.

Jurors were also shown a photo of JH, who was 4'11 and 93 pounds at the time, sitting with his hands behind his back, presumably handcuffed. Lawyers said the photo was taken at the school on the day of the incident.

The jury is expected to decide as soon as Friday whether school district employees violated the boy's rights under federal disabilities law and state law by calling 911 instead of using de-escalation techniques suited to his physical and emotional needs, and whether Sheriff's Office deputies did the same by placing him in a chokehold and arresting him.

JH continues to suffer "significant distress from the trauma of the incident," the suit states. His family is seeking damages, as well as an injunction to prohibit the school and sheriff's office from using physical restraints on schoolchildren "whose behaviors are a manifestation of their disabilities, and to compel defendants to revise their policies, practices and training accordingly."

Olden Toups, legal representation for the Jefferson Parish School Board, declined to comment on any of the claims Monday. Court documents show the board denies all allegations.

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SERVICES

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The Municipal Complex committee, tapped by Moreno within days of her taking office, has focused since August on remedying a problem that has dogged several administrations: the deteriorated state of City Hall and the adjoining district court building on Perdido Street downtown.

Last month, the committee eyed annex locations suggested by New Orleans East residents at a previous public sessions, including the former Schwegmann Brothers Giant Supermarket on Bullard Avenue, the old Lake Forest Plaza shopping center on Interstate 10 Service Road, the New Orleans Police Department's 7th District station on Dwyer Road and other sites as potential locations for an annex.

Earlier Tuesday, the committee held its eighth meeting, which focused on cost estimates for New Orleans City Hall and Civil District Court building options. It will hold two more meetings before submitting a final proposal in January to the City Council. City Hall annex costs were not discussed on Tuesday.

At the afternoon meeting, Brian Carroll, executive director of Jones Lang LaSalle commercial real estate, presented the most detail yet about how much it would cost the city to do nothing, to renovate and lease the current building on Perdido Street, to raze it and build anew or to take a mixed approach.

Keeping the aging buildings and continuing to lease 13 downtown facilities for overflow office space would cost $14 million in one year and $430 million over 30 years without making improvements. Renovating the existing buildings could cost up to $490 million, including additional leases.

Building a new City Hall and court on the current site would be the most expensive option, estimated to cost between $670 million and $860 million up front. Over 30 years, it could cost up to $1.18 billion. A hybrid method could cost up to $380 million. The cheapest option is to buy a building for offices and build a new courthouse and ceremonial chamber.

"Many of these options could save hundreds of millions of dollars just by shaving down square footage," Carroll said, adding that space is the largest driver of costs. He said prices to acquire space are relatively low. Meanwhile, costs are very high for renovation and construction.

Saints and Pelicans owner Gayle Benson's group has also pitched the committee on leasing her high-rise at 1515 Poydras St. A City Council chamber and a new courthouse would be built adjacent to the main building, according to the $342 million plan.

Other ideas for paying for new court buildings include private-sector capital investments, historic tax credits, court fees or bonds. The court also has a building fund, worth over $20 million by the end of 2024, according to an independent audit.

The committee did not make a decision on Tuesday. All Municipal Complex meetings are open to the public.

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LEGAL

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through a seven-figure financial dispute between Barrios' company, CivicSource, and the city.

"I'm sorry your client is not here because I want to look him in the eye," Barial said, addressing Barrios' attorney. She also threatened Barrios with jail time for any further improper communications.

Barrios had been present for most of the 90-minute hearing, but left shortly before Barial, who called his attempts to influence the accountant "offensive," issued the sanction. Emails in the court record show Barrios repeatedly tried to convince the accountant to consider documents apart from Barial's instructions.

Barrios' lawyer, Bob Ellis, acknowledged Barrios' actions and said his absence for the ruling "isn't great." Ellis noted that the accountant, Jeffrey Meyers, ignored Barrios' overtures.

"I don't know what effect or bearing it had on Mr. Meyers at all," Ellis said.

Embezzlement allegation

Barrios is already facing court judgments totaling about $7 million in three states and an FBI investigation, the status of which is unclear. And recent court filings in a separate case in Baton Rouge provided new details to support the Louisiana Department of Insurance's allegation that Barrios either embezzled or misappropriated from CivicSource.

In that case, a state-appointed receiver overseeing Barrios' title insurance company claimed CivicSource improperly paid more than $4 million to Barrios. Half of that was for payments on Barrios' house note, charged as "rent expense" on the CivicSource ledger, and the other half was paid to Barrios outside of his compensation, according to an Oct. 22 affidavit filed by Frank McNabb, a certified public accountant.

"None of these payments appear to have been treated as taxable distributions, leading me to question whether Barrios reported these payments as taxable income," McNabb wrote.

Barrios' insurance company, U.S. National Title Insurance Company, insured titles acquired through CivicSource auctions. The Department of Insurance moved to seize U.S. National this year, claiming CivicSource owed the company $1.9 million in outstanding premiums.

The state petition filed in 19th Judicial District Court said there was "reasonable cause to believe" Barrios had embezzled or fraudulently diverted CivicSource funds. McNabb said his review of CivicSource and U.S. National financial information supported the allegation.

Barrios claims he waived fees owed by U.S. National totaling the same amount in unremitted premiums, meaning there is no outstanding debt between the two companies.

"Any suggestion by you or anyone else that there was embezzlement will be regrettable in light of the verifiable facts," Barrios said in an email to The Times-Picayune.

'Good fortune'

CivicSource conducted tax sales and adjudicated property auctions for the city from 2014 to 2025, under a novel arrangement that returned thousands of blighted properties to commerce. The city received the sale proceeds and reimbursed CivicSource for its costs, including its fees. The business took off, with CivicSource landing similar contracts in parishes and cities across Louisiana and in other states.

Over the past several years, however, investors accused CivicSource of failing to deliver property titles or stealing deposits. County governments in Memphis and Wichita accused CivicSource of failing to remit sale proceeds. A criminal investigation in Wichita was referred to the FBI's New Orleans office, according to the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office. Agents have questioned people involved in CivicSource transactions who spoke to The Times-Picayune, but the FBI has declined comment.

The city of New Orleans claims CivicSource failed to remit $1.7 million in sale proceeds, a debt memorialized in a May 2025 contract amendment. The city then stopped paying CivicSource's costs, leading to a flurry of litigation between the two parties.

Meyers was appointed to sort out who owed what to whom, accounting for CivicSource's past debt to the city and its unpaid costs. He arrived at CivicSource owing the city $192,000. Barrios emailed Meyers at least four times asking him to consider additional documentation, including on Sept. 9, in advance of an upcoming video conference with Barial and city lawyers.

Barrios asked Meyers to help make sure Barial "has the clearest and most complete understanding possible."

"Anything you can do to help us get there this week would mean more to me and to a lot of people than you probably realize. And I can't help but believe that kind of help radiates good fortune for lifetimes to come," Barrios wrote.

Barial said in court on Thursday that she had instructed Barrios not to personally contact Meyers on multiple occasions. She said Barrios personally went to Meyers' office even after her "dressing down" of his lawyer for the improper email contacts. He also tried to contact Barial and her staff, she said.

"It's unacceptable because of the appearance of impropriety, and I take it very seriously," Barial said.

Barial upheld Meyers' finding that CivicSource owes the city $192,000, and rejected CivicSource's claims the city owes outstanding costs dating back before the 2025 contract amendment. CivicSource has put that figure as high as $28 million and blames the city for its financial troubles.

But she allowed CivicSource to proceed with its claim that the city owes costs incurred since then. The amount CivicSource is claiming for those costs isn't yet clear.

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STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

Jefferson Parish officials launch the train-tracking app Move Jefferson in Metairie on Tuesday.

TRAIN

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Taylor Street and Jefferson Highway. It's an expansion from the current version, which monitors trains only at Metairie Road.

Officials say the app will serve as a vital tool for east bank drivers, particularly those around River Ridge, Old Jefferson and Old Metairie, who rely on routes with train crossings to get in and out of neighborhoods despite unpredictable traffic caused by changing schedules and service routes that can cause trains to sit idle for more than an hour at a time.

The new app, expected to be released this week pending app store approval, will be renamed "Moving Jefferson," instead of the previous name "Move Metairie: Tracking Forward." Users with "Move Metairie" will only need to update the app to view the other train crossings and do not need to download another app.

"This is the perfect way of trying to figure out how to live with the railroads," said Jefferson Parish Council member Hans Liljeberg, who helped lead the expansion. "They are here. They're not going anywhere."

The app uses cameras and audio sensors installed at each crossing to track trains' location and speed, and then alert drivers when a train will arrive at a crossing, what direction it is moving and when it is expected to clear the crossing. It also provides live camera feeds of the crossings, which the parish has also offered on its website since 2022.

The expansion has been in the works since 2024 and carries a price tag of about $300,000, funded through the Jefferson Parish Council offices of members Jennifer Van Vrancken, Deano Bonano and Liljeberg at $100,000 each. Engineering firm Gresham Smith designed the app and worked with TRAINFO, another engineering firm, and parish crews to design and install the tracking technology.

Officials said they are also conducting a traffic study for future expansions to include West Bank train crossings, with tentative locations including Klein Street, Barataria Boulevard and Destrehan Avenue.

Van Vrancken launched the original app for the Metairie Road crossing in 2023 at a cost of $200,000 to help drivers plan their routes around when trains would block the intersection. The app currently has an estimated 7,000 users.

Traffic jams at train crossings are far from a new issue for Jefferson Parish drivers, although complaints have flared up in the past when railroad companies change operations and cause trains to sit idle in high-traffic areas for long periods of time.

The most recent example was one year ago, when the North Labarre Road crossing fell victim to hourslong blockages in the mornings after railroad company Norfolk Southern added a new freight rail service on the track and trains stopped there to exchange railcars with other trains. The Jefferson Parish Council later negotiated an agreement with Norfolk Southern to limit idle hours to overnight instead of mornings.

Parish officials also previously called on U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, to intervene on the train issues in 2020, after trains began idling for hours at three major intersections in Old Metairie. The stopped trains blocked emergency vehicles from responding to calls, and led children to crawl under trains while leaving Metairie Playground.

Lara Nicholson writes about Jefferson Parish for The Advocate | Times-Picayune. Email her at lnicholson@theadvocate.com.

LOTTERY

MONDAY, NOV. 9, 2026
PICK 3: 2-8-7
PICK 4: 6-2-0-3
PICK 5: 0-4-9-7-8
POWERBALL: 13-34-41-45-48 (25)

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