

METRO

Jacksonville eyes \$2.4 million court settlement

Steve Patterson
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

The bankrupt creator of a Westside Jacksonville wetland mitigation bank has agreed to a \$2.4 million settlement of a lawsuit that claimed he cheated the city out of millions of dollars.

The City Council still has to decide whether to accept the deal outlined in an ordinance introduced at its Tuesday meeting.

If it's approved, the agreement with Ernest Hale and a chain of companies he was involved with could end years of disputes about what the city was owed from a deal it struck 18 years ago to make money by restoring wetlands west of Cecil Commerce Center.

The city had claimed more than \$9 million in damages when it sued Hale and the businesses in 2018, but said in its lawsuit that damage was "difficult to measure."

The city and Loblolly Mitigation Pre-

serve LLC, a company Hale incorporated, both own land in the Loblolly Mitigation Bank, where Hale oversaw work that repaired old damage to wetlands and earned environmental credits from the St. Johns River Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The credits could be sold to developers to offset environmental damage they caused in other neighborhoods.

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Ernest Hale, shown in a 2013 photo at the Loblolly Mitigation Bank, oversaw work to restore wetlands.
WILL DICKEY/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION



Rehab tech Ricardo Foster interacts with a child at Wolfson Children's Hospital's Autism and Neurodevelopment Center. He has autism and has become a role model for the young patients he works with. PROVIDED BY LAUREN PAPKE

Rehab tech at Wolfson becomes autism role model

Beth Reese Cravey
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

One day in Wolfson Children's Hospital's Autism and Neurodevelopment Center, a child who was inside a play tube tunnel refused to come out.

Neither his parent nor therapist could get him to budge.

So the therapist called over rehab tech Ricardo Foster, who has autism himself.

The therapist, Yvelisse Earle, asked

TO LEARN MORE

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Foster "to get on the child's level and offer his hand and calmly say, 'come here,'" said Lauren Papke, the center's autism program lead. "The child immediately responded by accepting his hand, coming out of the tube and walk-

ing with Ricardo all the way to the clinic exit. He was so enamored with Ricardo that he cried when it was time to let go of his hand and head home."

Foster, 23, has worked at the center since September 2020. As a child he was diagnosed with autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder marked by repetitive behaviors and impairment in verbal communication and social interaction. He has not let it hold him back, but he does let it help him reach

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Voucher expansion heads to DeSantis

Ryan Dailey
NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

TALLAHASSEE – Moving Florida a step closer to a major expansion of school vouchers, the Senate passed a measure that would widen eligibility for taxpayer-funded aid to send children to private schools.

The Republican-controlled Senate voted 25-14 Monday to pass the bill (HB 7045), which received approval from the House in a 79-36 vote last week. It is now ready to go to Gov. Ron DeSantis.

The wide-ranging bill, in part, would consolidate the Gardiner and McKay scholarship programs, which serve students with special needs, with the Family Empowerment Scholarship program, which serves a broader population of low- to middle-income families.

The proposal also would increase the maximum income eligibility to receive vouchers to 375 percent of the federal poverty level, meaning a family of four making nearly \$100,000 a year would qualify.

Senate sponsor Manny Diaz Jr., R-Hialeah, suggested during floor debate Monday that school closures and other effects of the COVID-19 pandemic increased an appetite for educational options in the state.

"The question we have here is a philosophical choice: Do we trust our families to make the right decisions for their student?" Diaz said. "COVID has exposed this even further, because parents have seen the education of their children go on, sometimes, on their dining room table."

Sen. Lorraine Ausley, D-Tallahassee, argued Monday that the Gardiner and McKay scholarships give "real choices" to special needs students and opposed folding the programs into the larger Family Empowerment Scholarship program.

"The changes contemplated by this bill claim to provide more parental choice, but I am very concerned that by combining these two very different programs, we are going to undermine them both," Ausley said.

Diaz pushed back on the idea that the programs serving students with special needs would be put at a disadvantage. Under the measure, students

Role model

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others.

"I love working with the children," he said. "I understand better what they need and how they respond. That's what I love the most."

Foster is a success story for The Arc Jacksonville, a nonprofit that serves individuals with intellectual and developmental differences and has helped guide him from high school to full-time employment.

"Our vision is for individuals of all abilities to have quality options on how they live, learn, work and play," said Jim Whittaker, president and CEO. "Ricardo is an example of how someone's skills can be matched with a local business so the individual has meaningful employment while providing a benefit to the company."

Role model parents, teachers

Growing up with autism, Foster looked to his parents, stepfather and grandmother — "The people that keep me moving" — for motivation.

"It may have taken me longer to do certain things, but I still did them," he said. "I'm a very outgoing person. I am friendly, I enjoy making friends. I'm acceptive of everyone. I don't ever let something stop me; I always press through."

In the third grade, he began attending Morning Star School, a part of the Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine that serves children with learning challenges, attention deficit, autism and mild intellectual differences. He thrived there through eighth grade, then departed for ninth and 10th grade because the school did not serve those ages at the time. When Morning Star added high school, he returned for 11th and 12th grade.

"Ricardo is an exceptional person," said Principal Elaine Shott. "He has such a big heart and a drive to always better himself. ... He is truly an inspiration."

In high school he was already helping others.

"During his last two years at Morning Star, he was a mentor for our third-eighth grade student council members, he would read to our primary students and was a role model for up and coming high school students," Shott said.

Foster said, "Morningstar was a true blessing and eye opener. They have taught me so many things and lessons. Morningstar made me the person that I am right now."

In his later years at the school, Foster was part of the High School High Tech program funded by The Able Trust, also known as the Florida Endowment Foundation for Vocational Rehabilitation, and administered locally by The Arc. The program gives high schoolers with such differences "the opportunity to explore jobs or postsecondary education leading to technology-related careers," according to The Arc.

"I think it is important for people to understand that individuals with autism and other differences have abilities often unseen by the general public," said

Susan Hamilton, the agency's vice president of employment. "They have a willingness to be the best version of themselves and really just need people to give them an opportunity to prove themselves."

When Foster graduated, he was nervous about the future, Shott said.

"I remember Ricardo being extremely apprehensive about leaving ... and telling him he will be just fine," she said. "He has what it takes to succeed. He had a great work ethic, a kind heart and a strong faith base."

That summer he got a paid internship at The Arc Jacksonville Village, an independent-living, apartment-style neighborhood for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"That was actually fun," he said.

A beacon for patients' parents

In 2020 he was hired at Wolfson. He got the job through The Arc's Employment Services program that provided coaching, among other things.

"In working with children with autism, we see firsthand the obstacles that individuals with special needs face in their communities despite having capabilities and skillsets needed to flourish," Papke said. So the center contacted The Arc to fill openings.

"During Ricardo's Zoom interview he was able to showcase his calm demeanor, warm smile and work experience through vocational training," she said. "We immediately knew he'd be a great fit. ... To be honest, we do not treat Ricardo differently than any other team member. He is very much a part of the Wolfson Rehab family."

The Autism and Neurodevelopment Center, which opened in 2017, provides early intervention services to

children with or at risk of autism spectrum disorder. The specially designed program uses a "family-centered approach to support the development of a child's communication, regulation and social skills," Papke said. "We provide speech-language therapy and occupational therapy via fun and engaging play routines."

Foster supports the therapists by sanitizing treatment surfaces, helping them prepare materials for treatment sessions and assisting in patient care. Also, he is "a model for play and engagement" for the children, Papke said, and provides hope for the future for their parents.

"Ricardo has served as a beacon of light for many of our patients' parents," she said. "The children we see are often new to or are awaiting diagnosis, so it can be a very challenging and uncertain time for families. Ricardo is an amazing example of how individuals with developmental differences can go on to lead happy, healthy and productive lives."

'All right to be different'

Foster aspires to be a classroom teacher.

"I enjoy teaching others. Ever since I was in middle school I have always had a dream of being a teacher," he said. "I want to teach social studies and I want to teach the elementary kids."

But he is also growing into an advocacy role for children who have autism — and himself.

"We see things through a different lens, but we are no different than anybody else," he said. "We may do things differently or say things differently, but it's all right to be different."

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**NORTH FLORIDA
TPO**

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Due to the global health crisis (COVID-19), all meetings will be a hybrid of virtual/in-person attendance. Meeting agendas and details available online at www.northfloridatpo.com.

TPO BOARD MEETING
May 13, 2021 at 10 a.m.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS
May 5 at 10 a.m. Technical Advisory Committee
May 5 at 2 p.m. Citizens Advisory Committee
May 6 at 9 a.m. Duval County Transportation Disadvantaged Local Coordinating Board*

*Includes a public meeting to hear concerns regarding coordinated transportation

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