

ON SHAKY GROUND

Palm: ‘Queen of Versailles’ still a work in progress



THIS IS BAD

Bianchi: Florida college football has never been darker

HIS NEXT STEPS

Orange County mayor begins governor campaign

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Orlando Sentinel

Man taken by ICE after 70 years in US

Sanford grandfather in legal limbo at Krome center

By Jeffrey Schweers

Orlando Sentinel

Paul John Bojerski was born to Polish parents in a German refugee camp a year after World War II ended. His family legally emigrated to the United States in 1952 when he was five.

More than seven decades later, the 79-year-old Sanford grandfather — still a man without a country — found himself in legal limbo in the Alligator Alcatraz detention camp in the Everglades, picked up on a decades-old deportation order authorities had previously chosen not to enforce.

Bojerski’s case is complex and unusual — the most bizarre one his immigration attorney says he has handled in 30 years — but also part of the Trump administration’s widespread effort to deport millions of immigrants who it claims lack legal standing to be in the U.S., even those who lived here for decades with full knowledge of immigration officials.

The retired optician, taken into custody late last month, was recently moved to the Krome Detention Center in Miami and has a bond hearing on Tuesday. His family worries his health is failing while

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Growing battle for public dollars worries arts leaders

By Matthew J. Palm

Orlando Sentinel

When Orange County commissioners approved \$5.16 million in cultural-tourism grants at the end of October, it was a rare bright spot in an autumn of uncertainty for Central Florida’s arts organizations.

Local cultural leaders have cast a wary eye on Tallahassee, where the state’s support of arts and culture — for years an established process with rigorous vetting that ran like clockwork — now generates more questions than revenue.

To wit, it’s unclear how 24 cultural groups were chosen to receive \$1.5 million that the legislator who pushed the funding intended for a much larger pool of organizations. The process for awarding \$1 million in the state’s America 250 grants to celebrate the nation’s semiquincentennial — grants that ended up mostly bypassing arts organizations — is equally obscure.

And now the funding process for the next legislative session, which begins

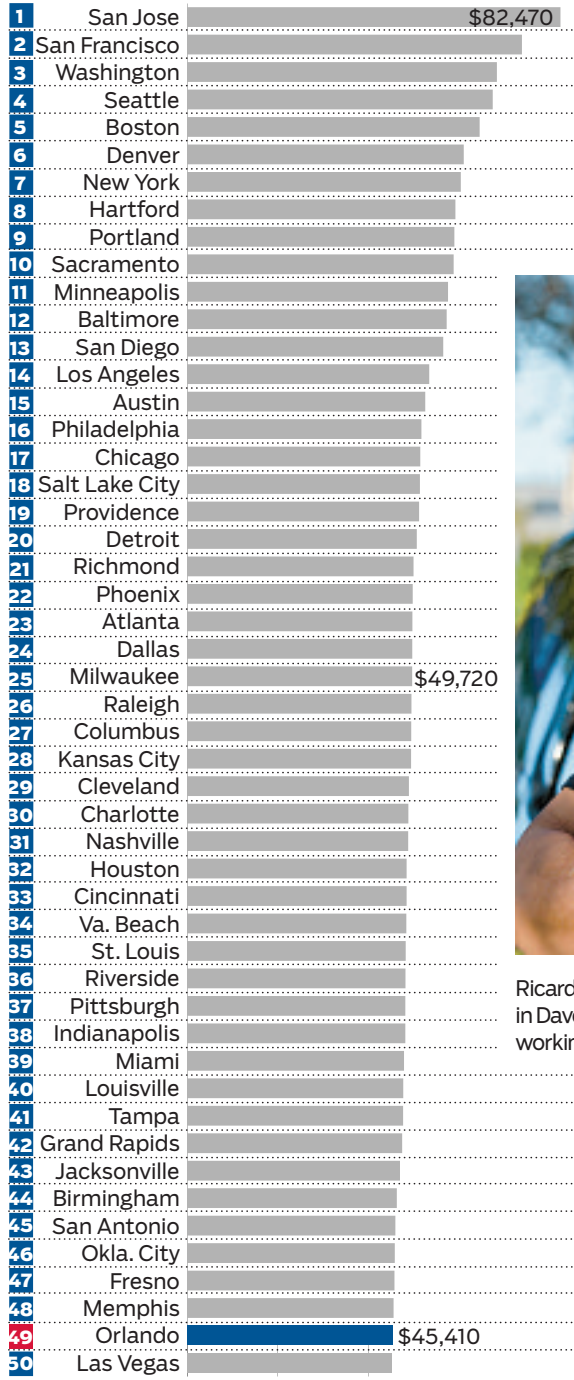
Turn to Funding, Page 4

Orlando now ranks 49th of 50 in wages

In our tourism-based economy, too many people live on edge of financial cliff

How Orlando’s wages compare

Of the 50 most populated metro areas, Orlando ranked 49th in median annual wage for 2024.



Wages from Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics Query System (period: May 2024). Metropolitan Statistical Areas are listed by principal city for readability; e.g., Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford was shortened to "Orlando." Compiled by Zoey Thomas, Orlando Sentinel. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

NATE BLOOMQUIST/TRIBUNE DPS

Every time we spend another half billion dollars expanding the convention center or another \$100 million promoting tourism, we’re creating more jobs that keep us at the bottom.

For more than a decade, Orlando has held the dubious distinction of offering the lowest median wages of any major metro area in America. We’re talking dead last — 50th out of 50, trailing regions half our size and with much cheaper costs of living. It means we’re a community full of people who work full-time jobs and yet still can’t make ends meet. Some can’t afford cars or homes. Some work into their 70s. Well, according to the latest statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Orlando is no longer dead last. We’re now second-to-last at 49th. A slight improvement but still dreadfully low.



Scott Maxwell



Ricardo Zabala stands next to his vehicle, which he uses as an Uber driver, around Central Florida in Davenport this month. Zabala has two kids and drives for Uber before and after his shifts working as a cook at a restaurant in Epcot to make ends meet. RICH POPE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

One of the starkest stats: One out of every four jobs in Central Florida paid less than \$16.76 an hour, which was just a few bucks more than minimum wage when the numbers were tallied through May of last year.

This explains why we’re a community full of people who live on the edge of a financial cliff.

On the plus side, local wages have risen faster in recent years than they have in America at large. But they’re still way below average for cities our size.

The new dead last is Las Vegas. It’s not surprising that two tourism towns are in a battle for the bottom. When your economy is built on the backs of hotel desk clerks, ride attendants and people who change bed linens for a living, many will struggle. Both communities make headlines for a lack of workforce housing.

Once upon a time, Central Florida was affordable. That’s no longer the case. Homes that cost \$150,000 in 2000 now cost \$400,000. Wages haven’t kept pace.

The median wage in metro Orlando for 2024 was \$45,410, including tips, bonuses and incentives, according to the BLS. That’s about \$4,000 below the national median.

If you want to put a face on those numbers, meet Ricardo Zabala, a 58-year-old cook at one of the nicer sit-down restaurants inside the Italian section of Epcot’s World Showcase.

Zabala hand crafts pasta at Via Napoli, where the chicken parm costs \$38 and large pizzas start at \$42. He makes just above the median wage in Central Florida, more than many cooks, and yet drives Uber shifts both before and after his full-time job to pay his bills and cover the mortgage on his 1,800-square-foot house in Haines City.

Zabala moved to Central Florida eight years ago from Venezuela in search of a better life. He says he found it: “I am very grateful to this country for opening the doors.” But gratitude

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