

Vaccine order to end?

DeSantis and Florida’s surgeon general push to make the state the first in the U.S. to end all inoculation mandates for children.

**BY KIRBY WILSON
AND ROMY ELLENBOGEN**
Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

Florida is set to push for an end to all state vaccine mandates, state Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo announced at a news conference Wednesday.

For decades, the state has required numerous vaccines for kids attending school, a list that today includes shots that protect against measles-mumps-ru-

bella, polio, chickenpox and hepatitis B.

But Ladapo on Wednesday compared these mandates to “slavery,” and promised that they all will soon end.

“All of them. Every last one of them,” Ladapo said to raucous cheers from the crowd assembled at the Grace Christian School in Valrico. “Who am I as a man standing here now to tell you what you should put in your body?”

Dr. Nancy Silva, a Wesley Chapel pedi-

atrician, said ending the vaccine mandates for schoolchildren will endanger their health and bring back diseases with life-threatening health complications that most parents of school-age children have never faced.

She questioned why the DeSantis administration would make vaccines an issue when school mandates have proven effective at eradicating and

See VACCINE, 6A



Florida’s surgeon general, Dr. Joseph Ladapo, speaks at an event in March. On Wednesday, he said the state will push to end all vaccine mandates. (LUIS SANTANA | Times)

Former Fla. House speaker to run for governor

Paul Renner will face U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds in the primary.

BY ROMY ELLENBOGEN
Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Former Florida House Speaker Paul Renner is jumping into the race to replace term-limited Gov. Ron DeSantis.

The Palm Coast Republican filed on Wednesday for the 2026 governor’s race. The move will pit him against fellow Republican U.S. Rep. Byron Donalds, who has secured President Donald Trump’s endorsement.



Paul Renner

“If elected, I will go to where I have to go to stop any crack in the wall for the free state of Florida,” Renner said.

Other Florida Republicans have also been rumored to be eyeing the state’s top job, including Lt. Gov. Jay Collins and first lady Casey DeSantis.

Renner, a U.S. Navy veteran, said he believes there’s an appetite for a “robust primary.”

“Some voters will vote merely on an endorsement; I think many will look more broadly,” Renner said.

In response to Renner’s announcement, Ryan Smith, a spokesperson for Donalds’ campaign, said in a statement that “Byron Donalds will be Florida’s next Governor because he is the proven conservative fighter endorsed by President Trump.”

Renner said he spoke with DeSantis about his plan to run, but declined to comment on what the governor said. But DeSantis on Wednesday morning said Renner would not have his support.

See RENNER, 3A



The “Back the Blue” street art mural is seen on Aug. 26 outside of the Tampa Police Department building at top, and the same roadway is seen Wednesday after the removal of the pavement mural. (DIRK SHADD | Times)

Tampa street art is removed by crews, including pro-police mural

47 pavement artworks were covered, following similar efforts in St. Petersburg and Clearwater, in response to a state crackdown.

BY NINA MOSKE
Times Staff Writer

More than 40 Tampa pavement murals and painted crosswalks were removed by state crews over the week-end, a spokesperson for the city’s mobility department said Wednesday.

Covered artworks include a “Back the Blue” mural near

the Tampa Police Department, a colorful design sponsored by the Tampa Bay LGBT Chamber and several painted crosswalks outside elementary, middle and high schools, originally installed for safety purposes as part of the city’s Crosswalks to Classrooms initiative.

State and city crews began removing the art last week, fol-

lowing an August directive from the Florida Department of Transportation.

Local state transportation secretary Justin Hall sent a letter identifying 44 “noncompliant pavement markings” to be covered by Sept. 4, adding that the state could withhold funding if the city failed to comply.

See STREET, 2A

DeSantis says art is a ‘hazard.’ Studies say otherwise

BY NAKYLAH CARTER
Times Staff Writer

Colorful crosswalks and murals on pavement throughout Florida have been erased after state officials ordered their removal by Thursday.

Nixing the murals, which sometimes highlighted issues

like LGBTQ+ Pride or support for the police, has stirred emotions across the state. In St. Petersburg, two pastors were arrested last week for protesting the removal of a “Black History Matters” mural.

Gov. Ron DeSantis has said roadways aren’t the place for

political messaging. But he’s also insisted there’s a safety concern for drivers and pedestrians.

“I think this is the best policy,” DeSantis said Tuesday. “It’s just too much to have this, and then what’ll happen is it creates safety hazards. One, (by)

people just seeing it, but then you have some people who may disagree with the message and then they’re incentivized to try to, like, peel out or something.”

The Florida Department of Transportation’s June 30 memo about street markings indicated

See DATA, 2A

Mordecai Walker, the oldest living Gas Plant descendant, dies at 101 years old

He was born in Tampa and was a veteran of the U.S. Army, an educator and later became a real estate agent in St. Pete.

BY COLLEEN WRIGHT
Times Staff Writer

Mordecai Walker, the oldest remaining former resident of the Gas Plant, the Black community once located at the current site of Tropicana Field, died Aug. 17, according to a funeral home notice. He was 101.

Walker was born on the July Fourth on a lake in Tampa. He attended Citrus Park Colored School where, years before the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation of public schools, students had to use materials handed down from white schools.

At 19, he was drafted into

a segregated U.S. Army and served in the Pacific theater during World War II, according to the Weekly Challenger. He saw combat, according to Tampa Bay Times archives, sustaining an injury when a piece of scrap metal hit him in the head.

After leaving the Army, Walker attended and graduated from Tennessee State University in 1951. He returned to Tampa to become a school teacher and moved back to St.



Mordecai Walker, assisted by his son, Andrew Walker, throws the first pitch before the start of a Tampa Bay Rays game in St. Petersburg. (LUIS SANTANA | Times, 2023)