



## Bork has unmatched lifting development in Polk County

SPORTS, 4B

# The Ledger

THURSDAY, JULY 9, 2026 | THELEDGER.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## Appeals court rules FL Stop WOKE act unconstitutional

**Stephany Matat**  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Florida's law limiting race-based trainings or instruction still can't be enforced, after a sharply divided three-judge appeals court panel ruled that the law violates the First Amendment rights of students and professors.

The 2-1 majority of the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals contended that the law suppresses political viewpoints contrary to Florida officials in academic settings, and that the law would "create a

new rule that would quietly remove all free speech protections from the classroom," wrote Judge Britt Grant, who was appointed by President Donald Trump in 2018.

The ruling blasts the law as a "breath-taking assertion of power to ban unpopular ideas from public discourse."

"Because the government pays the professors' salaries, Florida says, their speech is the State's speech," Grant wrote. "Emphatically no."

This decision comes after multiple years of legal battles, since the law (HB

7) was signed in 2022 by Gov. Ron DeSantis to combat "woke" ideologies in schools, colleges and universities. At this time, DeSantis' national profile was rapidly rising prior to him announcing a White House presidential bid, and he positioned himself on battling cultural issues and a chief critic to critical race theory.

DeSantis has kept the fight going over the years. In recent months, Florida officials moved to disallow introductory

See COURT, Page 2A



A federal appeals court ruled that Florida's Stop WOKE Act, signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, cannot be enforced because it likely violates First Amendment protections.

TORI SCHNEIDER/TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT



The new Orlando Health Watson Clinic Lakeland Highlands Hospital on June 25. PHOTOS BY ANDY KUPPERS/THE LEDGER

## New hospital opens its doors

Lakeland Highlands is city's first to open in more than 100 years

**Sara-Megan Walsh**  
Lakeland Ledger  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Lakeland's first new hospital in more than 100 years has opened its doors to start treating Polk County patients.

The Orlando Health Watson Clinic Lakeland Highlands Hospital officially opened its doors July 8 at 9 a.m.

It's located at 4000 Lakeland High-

lands Road.

"This is an exciting day in Polk County," Carlos Carrasco, president of Orlando Health Watson Clinic Lakeland Highlands Hospital, said in a statement. "Our experienced and dedicated physicians and staff are ready and looking forward to serving this community. Today represents the launch of something new, a truly unique collaboration between Watson Clinic and Orlando Health, focused on improving the health and quality of life of the greater Polk County region."

See HOSPITAL, Page 2A



Staff in the obstetrics and gynecology department at the new Orlando Health Watson Clinic Lakeland Highlands Hospital.

## Lawson, Brandes challenge tax change

**James Call**  
Tallahassee Democrat  
USA TODAY NETWORK

A bipartisan pair of former Florida lawmakers is challenging a proposed constitutional amendment on property taxes, arguing voters are being presented with a politically charged and misleading description of a measure that could gut local government finances.

Former U.S. Rep. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, who also served as Senate Democratic leader during his tenure in the Florida Legislature, and former state Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, filed a lawsuit July 7 in Leon County Circuit Court seeking to prevent Amendment 3 from appearing on the November 2026 ballot unless its title and summary are rewritten.

The suit, which names Secretary of State Cord Byrd and Attorney General James Uthmeier as defendants, is the third legal challenge to the property tax proposal approved during a June special session of the Republican-controlled Legislature.

Lawson and Brandes argue the ballot language is written to persuade voters rather than inform them and fails to explain the amendment's potential impact on local governments and public services.

"The reason for this lawsuit is because the Legislature did not do their job," Lawson told the USA TODAY Network - Florida. "This is totally, really

See TAXES, Page 3A



### Learn if a Reverse Mortgage Is Right for You

Scan to Read the Full Article



Call to Find Out What Your Home Is Worth  
**866-602-2574**

#### Subscriber-only eNewspaper

The eNewspaper is an electronic copy of your print newspaper. Enjoy every page by going to theledger.com/enewspaper or scan this code on your mobile device. You will also find late news and sports in the bonus sections. Check it out today!



Volume 120 | No. 220  
Home delivery request inside  
Subscribe 863-802-7323  
©2026 \$2.50



0 90994 15001 0