

# The Times-Picayune

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## Court OKs merging clerk's offices

### Duncan loses his post in 4-3 vote of state Supreme Court

BY JOHN SIMERMAN  
Staff writer

A divided Louisiana Supreme Court on Monday endorsed Act 15, the new law that merged the two district court clerk's offices in New Orleans and eliminated the criminal clerk's post that a former life prisoner, Calvin Duncan, won last fall.

The court took up a pair of legal challenges lodged in Baton Rouge

to the controversial legislation authored by state Sen. Jay Morris, R-West Monroe. A 4-3 court majority upheld the new law and found that city officials overstepped last month when they named an interim clerk to the combined post and called for an election.

"No provision of the Louisiana or United States Constitution prohibits Act 15 from being immediately effective. By the clear terms of the Act, there is no vacancy in any of

office," the court ruled.

The opinion was unsigned. Justices Cade Cole, Jeff Hughes and Jay McCallum along with a fill-in justice, 1st Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Allison Penzato, comprised the majority. Justices John Michael Guidry, Piper Griffin and Chief Justice John Weimer dissented.

The decision made permanent a ruling the court issued earlier as it took up the case, endorsing

Chelsey Richard Napoleon, the elected civil clerk who was tapped by the Legislature under Act 15 to run a unified clerk's office.

Napoleon was one of two people who sued in Baton Rouge state court. She claimed the City Council shouldn't have appointed retired criminal Judge Calvin Johnson as interim clerk and called for a new election. The other lawsuit



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY CHRIS GRANGER  
Calvin Duncan was elected criminal court clerk for Orleans Parish last year.

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2026  
LEGISLATURE  
SESSION ENDS

## Legislators tighten oversight of La. child welfare agency



STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL JOHNSON

Speaker of the House Phillip DeViller, R-Eunice, bangs the gavel to end the 2026 legislative session on Monday.

'Everyone feels like this is a step in the right direction'

BY ALYSE PFEIL  
Staff writer

On the final day of the legislative session, lawmakers passed a bill to have stricter oversight of how Louisiana's child welfare system handles deaths caused by abuse and neglect.

While lawmakers stopped short of abolishing the Department of Children and Family Services, which has faced intense scrutiny over how it handles such deaths, some legislators said they

are not done asking whether the agency needs a bigger overhaul.

Senate Bill 237 requires more thorough reviews of child abuse and neglect cases, and it orders the department to give more detailed information about child deaths to a state watchdog and legislators.

"I feel like there's consensus that what we have in the bill is going to make a difference in helping kids without ballooning costs," said state Rep. Stephanie Berault, R-Slidell, who played a key role in negotiating the final version of the legislation. "And it's giving the department an opportunity for those changes to work and also getting them more help

➤ **Bill to take money from Orleans Parish DA passes.** PAGE 5A

and support."

Berault said members of the House and Senate, the department, the Governor's Office, the Attorney General's Office, the State Child Ombudsman's Office and Louisiana's child advocacy centers played a part in negotiations.

"At this moment, everyone feels like this is a step in the right direction," she said, adding that it moves Louisiana

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## Dealership faces opposition at former Kmart site

### Gayle Benson's company challenges effort from Matt Bowers

BY RICH COLLINS  
Staff writer

Saints and Pelicans owner Gayle Benson's automotive group is challenging an effort by rival auto dealer Matt Bowers to move his New Orleans-area Chevrolet dealership from Airline Drive near Kenner to the site of a former Kmart in the heart of Metairie, intensifying a long-simmering battle between two of the market's largest dealers.

Benson Automotive Group's Best Chevrolet and another local dealership, Banner Chevrolet, have been engaged in behind-the-scenes efforts to halt the move since March, when Chevy parent company General Motors informed state regulators it had approved the Matt Bowers Group's request to relocate its operation from 8213 Airline Drive to 2940 Veterans Blvd., according to records obtained from the Louisiana Motor Vehicle Commission.

The Veterans site, which Bowers has owned since 2020, shortly after Kmart shut down, is among the busiest commercial corridors in the metro area, across from Trader Joe's, near the intersection of Causeway Boulevard and two blocks from Lakeside Shopping Center.

In March 12 filings to the state commission, GM simply notified the agency it had approved the relocation proposal. It did not give a reason or include Bowers' explanation for wanting to relocate.

➤ See **DEALERSHIP**, page 7A



PHOTO BY HANK COLLINS

Matt Bowers has owned the former Kmart discount store at 2940 Veterans Blvd. since 2020.

## N.O. judicial cuts legislation swaps out seats

### Change comes as a last-minute surprise

BY MATT BRUCE  
and JOHN SIMERMAN  
Staff writer

A surprise change to a bill that would cut several judgeships in New Orleans caused consternation and finger-point-

ing as it passed on the final day of the legislative session Monday, while Gov. Jeff Landry lamented a deal to take a judge he favors off the bench.

Whether Landry signs the revised Senate Bill 217, which sailed through both houses of

the Legislature over a 24-hour span, remained in question after a weekend audible by lawmakers saved the seat of Criminal District Judge Leon Roche and landed a colleague, Rhonda Goode-Douglas, on the extinction list.

➤ See **CUTS**, page 7A



Roche



Goode-Douglas

WEATHER

HIGH 89  
LOW 75

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