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But over the past few months, I've heard from readers complaining that they had experienced lengthy delays and flight cancellations while traveling – or attempting to travel – on Elite, particularly on its wildly popular, non-stop service between Vero Beach and Newark, N.J.

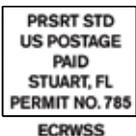
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Here's what I've learned: There's no way to verify whether these complaints have merit because nobody keeps track of Elite's on-time performance or its reasons for flight delays and cancellations.

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VERO FACING FINAL HURDLE TO ELECTRIC SALE IN PSC



By Lisa Zahner | Staff Writer
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A long-awaited Florida Public Service Commission staff recommendation was released late last week with some good news for Vero Beach, but with some

complex analysis that will keep supporters of the sale of the city's electric utility to Florida Power & Light on tenterhooks until the PSC meets next week.

The good news was the PSC staff recommendation that the

Commission on June 5 approve the sale and amend FPL's service territory to include Vero's 34,000 customers in and outside the city.

This positive sign should not

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

New development keeps GHO on vanguard of building boom

By Kathleen Sloan | Staff Writer
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The mainland building boom, GHO's homebuilding dominance in Indian River County, and the county's careful oversight of development continue with approval of the Arabella Reserve Subdivision at the corner of 58th Avenue and 49th Street.

The preliminary plat for the single-family home community got a unanimous thumbs-up at the most recent County Planning & Zoning meeting.

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Vero arts groups take stock of cuts in state funding

By Michelle Genz | Staff Writer
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The drumbeat of news alerts about possible arts funding cuts began just as Vero's cultural season was reaching its peak, staffers so swamped with shows and concerts they hardly had time to inhale.

They managed a collective gasp, though, when they learned in March that state matching grants many rely on had been slashed by a staggering 90 percent.

Today, as their audiences head north or settle in for the lassitude of summer, Vero's signature cultural institutions are taking stock of the blow dealt them by a governor and state legislature who consider the arts non-essential.

The cuts in the state's Division of Cultural Affairs recommended matching grants will cost Riverside Theatre and the Vero Beach Museum of Art \$140,000 each. McKee Botanical Garden will lose \$100,000. Smaller but still important Vero arts groups, including the Theatre Guild, Ballet Vero Beach and Vero Beach Opera, will get next to nothing under the new protocols.

Florida's spending on arts and culture (a term loose enough to include zoos and race car museums) now amounts to .00028 percent of an \$88 billion budget. As a result, Florida's national ranking on arts spending slipped from 10th in the country to 48th.

The downward trend began after a banner year for funding in 2014-15, when Riverside and the Museum of Art both won their full program grant requests of \$150,000. On top of that, for the first time, the

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MY TAKE BY RAY MCNUITY

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MY TAKE

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Not the Federal Aviation Administration, which, I was surprised to discover, doesn't monitor such things.

Not the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), which does keep such records but receives mandatory reports only from larger carriers.

Not even those travel websites, which, as a customer service, rank many of the world's airlines, from global titans to U.S.-based regional carriers, according to their records for on-time departures and arrivals.

The reason? Elite's operation is so small that it isn't worth monitoring.

According to the BTS, only airlines that generate at least one-half of one percent of the total, scheduled-service, domestic passenger revenues are required – under federal law – to report their on-time performance and provide the reasons for flight delays.

Elite doesn't produce enough annual revenue to meet that threshold.

In 2018, in fact, there are only 18 carriers reporting these numbers, which cover non-stop, scheduled-service flights between points within the U.S. and its territories. Among them are the three major airlines – American, Delta and United – as well as Jet-Blue, Southwest, Spirit, Allegiant and Frontier. Elite is not on the BTS radar.

"There is no requirement on airlines that

do not meet the revenue threshold for reporting," Dave Smallen, the bureau's director of public affairs, wrote in an emailed response to my questions.

Indeed, Smallen said below-the-threshold airlines, such as Elite, are not even required to keep internal records of their on-time performance. Which prompted me to ask: Does Elite keep those records?

John Pearsall, Elite's president, said he could provide "no numbers" pertaining to his airline's on-time performance on flights arriving in and departing from Vero Beach because it's such a "small market."

As for recent complaints about delays and cancellations, Pearsall blamed the weather in the Northeast, which did endure a rough winter and snowstorms into March.

"We've had a small number of delays, just like many other airlines, but nothing extraordinary," Pearsall said. "Mostly, it was because of weather issues. There were a lot of severe storms in the Northeast and we had to adjust. We have no control over air traffic control.

"It's not a systems or operational issue at all," he added. "If it were, I'd have an explanation and the way we're going to correct it."

Some delays, however, were caused by mechanical issues, or at least that's what some travelers here were told.

Orchid resident Phil Coviello said his daughter was delayed twice on Elite flights at Easter time – for five hours in Newark on Good Friday and three hours in Vero Beach – because of mechanical problems.

He said that while he was waiting with her

and his grandchildren in the Vero Beach Regional Airport lobby, he spoke with several others who complained about delays of up to five hours and canceled flights.

"I was not the only one talking about it," Coviello said. "I spoke with a few John's Island people who were waiting for the plane to take off, and they weren't happy.

"I'm sure some of the delays were weather related, especially during the winter," he added. "But the delays I'm aware of, and the ones I was told about, were almost exclusively related to mechanical problems.

"If this keeps up, I'm worried that Elite is going to develop a poor reputation for reliability."

Why worry?

Coviello said if residents reach a point where they no longer trust that Elite can get them to their destination on schedule – some use the airline for business purposes, especially in the New York area – they might opt to fly another airline out of Melbourne, Orlando or West Palm Beach instead.

"If something happens [to delay your flight]," he said, "you have options at the other airports." And if bookings decline here, Elite might decide to discontinue its service to and from Vero Beach.

That's one good reason the city should be proactive and do what the feds won't – keep track of Elite's on-time performance and maintain a record of the reasons cited for delays and cancellations.

Another is this: Our community has entered into what amounts to a partnership

with Elite, and we have a right to know if the airline is operating as promised.

"It's not that we couldn't do it," Vero Beach Airport Director Eric Menger said of monitoring Elite's performance. "And if it's necessary to help our customer base, we'll certainly look at it.

"But it's nothing we're required to do, and I don't know that there's a reason to," he added. "Our general feeling is that, 90 percent of the time, we're fine."

Menger said his "main concern" is making sure the airport meets the Transportation Security Administration's requirements, especially as Elite adds flights and destinations.

However, Menger said he knows Elite has experienced some lengthy delays, because of both bad weather and mechanical issues. And he admitted that he does occasionally hear griping from frustrated passengers waiting for the flights to depart.

Often, he said, the complaints are relayed to him by airport personnel.

"I'll get them indirectly from members of the staff, who'll tell me, 'We had a couple of unhappy people today,'" Menger said. "But most people understand that airlines can't fly unless it's safe. ...

"The bottom line is: It's more important to have a safe flight than it is to be on time. Usually, we get both."

Maybe we do.

But until somebody starts keeping track of Elite's on-time performance and reasons for flight delays, we won't know.

And we should. ■



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ARTS FUNDING CUT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

museum was awarded a matching endowment grant of \$240,000.

The decline was precipitous thereafter. By the next fiscal year, program grants to the museum and Riverside were cut by more than half, to \$62,000 and \$68,000 respectively. The Theatre Guild got \$16,689, down from the \$35,000 recommended.

In a bright note, Fellsmere got a state windfall in 2015-16 – a \$500,000 grant to build a public activity space around the historic Fellsmere school, but the overall downward trend continued.

Last year, total state funding for nonprofit cultural organizations dropped from \$25 million to \$2.6 million. By contrast, the legislature this year voted to give the for-profit tourism industry subsidies of \$77 million.

Indian River's total state support for the arts for next year is a paltry \$29,932. That breaks down to \$9,800 for Riverside and the Museum of Art, though both were approved for \$150,000 by the Division of Cultural Affairs. McKee will get \$7,012, though it was approved to receive \$115,000. The Theatre Guild, which was approved for \$50,000, will get \$3,200.

Vero Beach Opera got the OK from the Division of Cultural Affairs for the \$25,000 it applied for, but when Tallahassee came back with only \$1,000, the group decided it wasn't worth filling out the paperwork.

Robyn Orzel, director of development at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, said she and other staff along with members of the board wrote letters to legislators telling them that "this really hurts," and asked donors to do the same. "Given the economic impact of cultural organizations across the state, one of the biggest things that's hard to get your arms around is that the state is not willing to support that. That's what's unfortunate," Orzel said.

She said the museum will try not to cut programming "if we can help it."

Orzel a 67 percent of the museum's budget comes from donations. When combined with membership fees and earned revenue in the form of tuition for art school, income from individuals jumps to 95 percent of the budget.

The museum's grant, as well as Riverside's and McKee's, typically comes from what the Cultural Affairs division calls general program support. Other grant categories include money for buildings and specific projects.

It was those categories that took the hardest hit in the state's 2018-19 budget. They, along with endowment grants, were effectively zeroed out.

Adam Schnell, founder and artistic director of Ballet Vero Beach, thought he had used a prescient strategy last year when he applied for money not through program support but for projects – namely, his new ballet, "Nutcracker by the Indian River."

Debuted last season and intended to be performed each year around Christmas, the

original ballet with its large cast, extravagant sets and hand-made costumes requires on-going staging expenses, including stage set-up, dancers' pay and special effects.

Last year, the state came through with \$25,000.

"What threw us off is that the general program support fluctuates from year to year, but they never touched the project grants," said Schnell. "We assumed that it was still safe, [even] when the news came out that they were cutting. Then they kept cutting and they kept cutting, further than they ever had before, and suddenly, the bulletin came out that they gutted the project grants."

"It was shocking," he said.

Schnell understands that other issues

arose that moved lawmakers as well as their constituents. There were expenses after Hurricane Irma in the fall. Then came the school shooting in Parkland that ultimately prompted \$400 million in spending that included money for school fortification and armed police at every school. At the same time, funding was granted to arts organizations that skipped over the rigorous review processes of the Division of Cultural Affairs and entered their request directly into the budget proposal. In all, more than \$2 million was doled out to those unvetted causes, almost the same that went to the Cultural Affairs recommended recipients.

"That's what is frustrating for a lot of people," said Schnell. ■

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BUILDING BOOM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

GHO Homes bought the 28-acre site from three separate owners last fall, according to county records, paying a total of \$915,000.

The company will develop the land and build 71 homes that will be laid out in two concentric squares around a large central pond, with five smaller storm water retention ponds tucked in corners. When ground is broken, Arabella will be the 16th subdivision in Indian River County in which GHO Homes has an active hand.

Originally the development was to be 17

acres with access off busy 58th Avenue, but County Planner Ryan Sweeney said GHO Homes bought 10 more acres to connect to 49th Street at the county's suggestion, making for a safer entrance.

Sweeney also commended GHO Homes for ceding a 67-foot-wide strip of land to the county to widen 58th Avenue, which is on the county's docket for late 2019. It will be widened from 49th Street to 57th Street, Sweeney said. GHO also enlarged its storm water ponds to handle runoff from the road widening, saving the county the trouble.

Waterway Village across the street, a Di-Vosta Home Builders' development, will pay for most of the improvements to the 58th Av-

enue and 49th Street intersection, as required under its developer's agreement with the county. GHO Homes' smaller contribution will be hammered out in its pending developer's agreement.

GHO will be required to plant a 25-foot-deep and 6-foot-high buffer to shield homes from 49th Street and 58th Avenue traffic. Exterior sidewalks on 58th Avenue have been deferred because of the road widening, with GHO paying the county to do the work when the time comes. The county will not require exterior sidewalks along 49th Street because a deep canal runs parallel.

Schulke, Bittle and Stoddard is GHO's engineer and representative in the Arabella

project-approval process. Joe Schulke said the land was once "an agricultural site, so it's already been flattened and cleared."

Although GHO Homes' corporate office is in Port St. Lucie, most of the company's employees live in Indian River County, where the builder is most active, Schulke said. ■

VERO ELECTRIC SALE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

be overlooked, said utility activist and CPA Glenn Heran. "Don't forget that those first two recommendations in the report are significant victories."

But in a 23-page document loaded with detailed financial and legal analysis, the PSC staff indicated it doesn't think acquiring Vero's 34,000 customers warranted FPL's \$185-million-plus purchase offer.

What this will mean to the sale remains to be seen. The PSC staff did not in its report posit its own view of a fair purchase price, but the possibility of the full commission insisting that the gap between \$185 million and some lesser value be bridged by FPL – either out of shareholder funds or by imposing a temporary "surcharge" on the utility bills of the acquired Vero customers – cannot be excluded.

The lion's share of the \$185 million FPL agreed to pay is going to buy Vero out of its entanglements with the Florida Municipal Power Agency (a \$108 million exit fee) and its wholesale power purchase contract with Orlando Utilities (another \$20 million).

FPL officials have long maintained that the Vero electric acquisition has been carefully crafted in such a way that its existing 4.9 million customers would not be adversely impacted – a key issue for the PSC – and former Shores Mayor Brian Barefoot expressed confidence FPL and the PSC would negotiate a solution.

FPL can continue to negotiate with the PSC staff, and with aides to the commissioners, but parties to a potential agency action cannot petition the five PSC members directly, and aides are not allowed to funnel information back to commissioners from FPL. So it's a somewhat complex dance for FPL's legal and financial team. FPL declined to address the possibility of a "surcharge" on newly acquired Vero electric customers.

Spokesperson Sarah Gatewood said "we are reviewing the staff's recommendation and look forward to discussing our petition further with the Commission on June 5." Vero City Manager Jim O'Connor and Mayor Harry Howle said they were awaiting a full briefing from FPL on what the PSC report means and what options might be available.

"It is still under review by FPL to determine what is being said," O'Connor said.

Vero rates are currently 27 percent higher than FPL's rates for the same amount of power consumed. Should Vero ratepayers be subjected to a "surcharge," it could mean paying the current Vero rates a while longer.

Or FPL could convince the PSC that it can absorb the full \$185 million without impacting its customer base. ■

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