Tampa Bay Times

FLORIDA'S BEST NEWSPAPER | tampabay.com | ★★★★ Wednesday, January 15, 2025 | $2



Former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi speaks before now-President-elect Donald Trump at a Nov. 2 campaign rally in Greensboro, N.C.
(ALEX BRANDON | Associated Press, 2024)

Bondi's corporate lobbying, explained

Amazon, GM, Uber and Major League Baseball are among the attorney general nominee's former clients.

BY KIRBY WILSON
Times Staff Writer

Just days after her eight-year run as Florida attorney general ended in January 2019, Pam Bondi began a new challenge.

She joined Ballard Partners, the lobbying firm headed by longtime Florida lobbying powerhouse Brian Ballard.

Although a relative newcomer to D.C. at the time, the firm had sway because of Ballard's connections to then-President Donald Trump. Ballard led Trump's Florida fundraising during his first run for the White House in 2016.

Bondi quickly assumed a roster of powerful clients, federal lobbying records show. General Motors, Uber, Major League Baseball, Carnival North America and Amazon all paid for Bondi's services within her first year or so at the firm.

In an interview with the Tampa Bay Times, Ballard described Bondi as a valuable addition to his shop, quick to charm yet poised and cautious. (Bondi has since left the firm.)

"She would always help me and the firm and our clients even in terms of 'should we take a client?'" Ballard said.

Now, with Bondi likely to lead Trump's Justice Department as U.S. attorney general, her lobbying years have come under renewed scrutiny. As attorney general, Bondi will oversee government cases against some of the same firms that were her clients.

On Wednesday and Thursday, she'll field questions from senators during confirmation hearings about her lobbying record and how it could inform her approach as attorney general.

"When you spend a lot of time representing corporations in a government relations context ... you become really sympathetic to the corporate point of view," said Jeff Hauser, the executive director of the progressive, Washington-based Revolving Door Project.

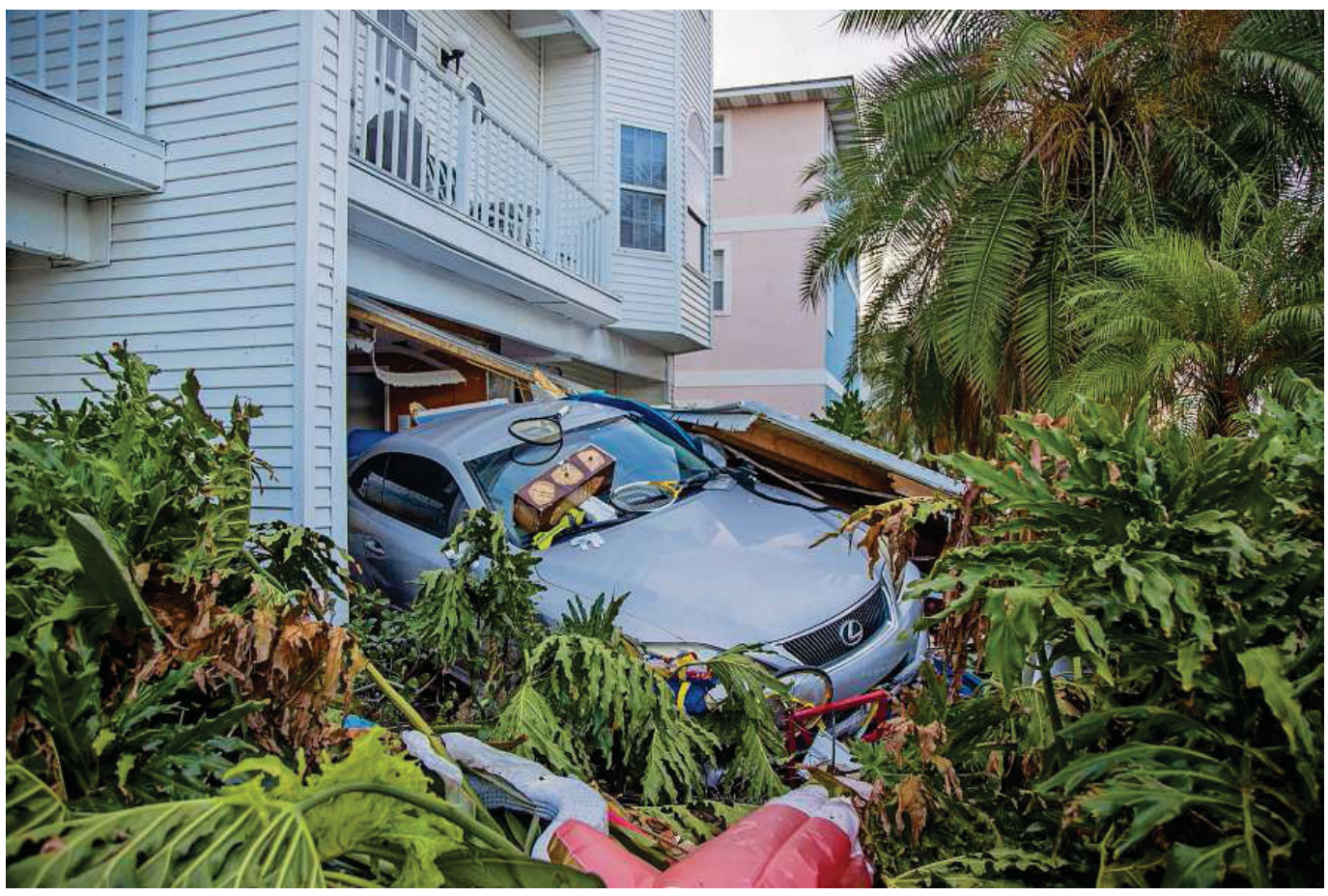
Here are four of her most prominent clients, and what she did for them.

Amazon

In 2020, Amazon bought at least $140,000 worth of lobbying services from Ballard Partners for "issues related to surface transportation, including autonomous vehicles" and "vehicle electrification," federal lobbying records show.

But lobbying forms only tell part of the story. Just because she is listed on her firm's disclosure form does not mean Bondi worked closely on the account, said Beth Leech, a professor of political science at Rutgers University. Bondi is one of five Ballard lobbyists listed on the forms.
See BONDI, 10A

Last hurricane season cost Tampa Bay BILLIONS. Here's the breakdown



A vehicle was pushed out of its garage by storm surge from Hurricane Helene on Sept. 28 in Madeira Beach. A state estimate said hurricanes Helene and Milton will likely cost Florida more than $23.3 billion. *(LUIS SANTANA | Times, 2024)*

BY MICHAELA MULLIGAN
Times Staff Writer

Months after a devastating hurricane season, Tampa Bay is still adding up the billions of dollars in damages caused by back-to-back storms.

Unlike past hurricane seasons, few areas of Tampa Bay went untouched by storms in 2024. Hurricane Debby dropped heavy rains, Helene pushed ashore deadly storm surge and Milton dealt a third, painful blow to the already water-bloated region.

The storms are likely not the priciest on record for the state, but the collective cost of the 2024 hurricane season, when all is officially tabulated, will almost certainly be the highest on record in Tampa Bay.

Understanding the full financial scope will take months, if not years.

In a combined look at Tampa Bay's most populous counties — Hillsborough and Pinellas — damage costs to businesses and residents amount to nearly $5 billion.

That is more than the entire federal estimated cost of Hurricane Idalia, which carved a path across several states in 2023.

A state estimate said Helene and Milton will likely cost Florida more than $23.3 billion, Florida's Office of Economic and Demographic Research Coordinator Amy Baker told state senators in early December.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates Helene is now the seventh-costliest hurricane on record in the country, costing about $78.7 billion. Milton is 11th at about $34.3 billion.

Hurricane Ian, the priciest Florida storm ever, remains the third most expensive in the country's history at about $119.6 billion.
See HURRICANES, 2A

A college 'enrollment cliff' is coming. How will Florida's higher education fare?

America's college and university student population is dropping. The state, though, might actually see growth.

BY IAN HODGSON
Times Staff Writer

The American higher education system is on the precipice of what experts and insiders are calling an "enrollment cliff."

A confluence of low birthrates, lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and public distrust in higher education means the market of collegegoers is shrinking nationally. And schools that don't adapt will fail as they struggle to fill classrooms.

One place where colleges might fare better than in other parts of the country: Florida.

Florida's population of high school graduates is expected to grow, not shrink. While the trend isn't evenly distributed across the state, high schoolers should increase by more than 10% within the next decade, according to state data.

Public colleges and universities
See COLLEGE, 3A

Officials say girl died after St. Pete doctor coerced her to produce porn

Stephen Leedy faces multiple charges. Here's how to protect your kids.

BY JACK PRATOR
Times Staff Writer

When police officers arrested Stephen Leedy on a winding Georgia road near the Blue Ridge mountains last month, he appeared bewildered by their accusations.

Officers served a warrant on federal charges that Leedy, 59, had coerced minors into producing child sexual abuse material.

The St. Petersburg palliative care doctor told them it must be a case of mistaken identity and gave up his smartphone passcode without a fuss.

Weeks later, federal prosecutors filed a motion to keep Leedy in custody while he awaits trial. They cited evidence indicating he was a danger to the public: Prosecutors say Leedy preyed upon 10 children, and one 13-year-old girl in Pasco County died after he directed her to hang herself.

Her death was ruled an accident, a Pasco County Sheriff's Office spokesperson said in an emailed statement to the Tampa Bay Times.

Leedy had communicated with the girl via Discord, a messaging and video chat app, according to autopsy records obtained by the Times. He concealed his identity through an anonymous username and never showed his face on camera, prosecutors said.

Leedy faces life in prison if convicted, although no murder charges have been filed in connection with the girl's death.

He is being held in federal custody in Atlanta on three counts of production of child sexual abuse material and two
See LEEDY, 6A

Cooler

8 a.m.	Noon	4 p.m.	8 p.m.
49°	60°	64°	58°

0% chance of rain
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COLLEGE
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could see enrollment increase by up to 6% in the next five years, according to the Florida Department of Education.

But while Florida has the potential to fare better than most states, it still must adapt to the changing demands of the market, experts said.

Every industry caters to its own demographic market, but few are as extreme as colleges and universities, which largely compete for the same class of high school seniors year after year, said Brian Ehrlich, vice president for enrollment management at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne.

"It's a unique problem to higher ed that doesn't impact other industries the same way," he said.



USF students gather before a spring commencement ceremony on May 4 in Tampa. Roughly 70% of Floridians think that a college degree leads to a better quality of life. *(LUIS SANTANA | Times, 2024)*

Colleges' struggles, Florida's strengths

After the 2007 financial crisis, American birthrates dropped at an alarming rate, falling nearly 2% the year after the housing market tanked. It was the largest one-year dip since the 1970s, and births have kept falling by roughly 1%, on average, since.

Children born in 2007 turn 18 this year. Most will be in the high school graduating class of 2025. Starting next year, colleges will have a dramatically shrinking pool of first-time college enrollees for the foreseeable future, according to United Nations demographic projections.

The latest data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows that enrollment of 18-year-old freshmen countrywide fell by 5% last year. Over the next decade, enrollment could fall by another 6%, according to the Western Interstate Commission of Higher Education.

The fewer students there are to fill classrooms, the fewer classrooms there will be.

Nationally, 46 post-secondary institutions closed in 2024, according to data collected by the Hechinger Report. That's up nearly 50% from the year before. Once the demographic cliff hits, the U.S. could see upwards of 80 schools closing per year, according to a recent study from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. The vast majority of recent closures are private, for-profit schools, according to the Hechinger Report.

That's one of several factors working in Florida's favor. While the state had 175 for-profit colleges that received federal dollars in 2023, three out of four undergraduates attended a public college or university. Another 16% went to one of the state's nonprofit schools, according to federal data.

It also helps that Florida is an attractive place to live, Ehrlich said.

"Families are moving to Florida and bringing their kids with them," he said. "When we have good in-state education, both public and private, that means their kids stay here."

Florida Tech, a private nonprofit college, recruits heavily from the Northeast and internationally. And while Ehrlich said the school's strong STEM-focused programs attract students, the school's proximity to the Atlantic coast "definitely helps us," he said.

The nation has faced demographic cliffs before, said higher education author and journalist Jeffrey Selingo. But each time, enrollment was bolstered by different populations previously excluded from higher education: women, Black and Hispanic students, international students, immigrants.

"Now schools are asking, 'Where is that population going to come from?'" he said.

Schools like Hillsborough Community College are adapting to reach new markets, said Kenneth Ray, vice president of student services.

Hispanics are the largest growing population of Florida high schoolers, but they have historically not been well-served by post-secondary institutions. Enrollment rates for Hispanics lag behind that of white students nationally, and the trend is moving in the wrong direction, according to U.S. Department of Education data.

Ray said his school communicates to students in both English and Spanish. Hispanic students are the school's fastest-growing demographic.

How Florida can make strides

Nationally, public perception of higher education has soured in recent years. But roughly 70% of Floridians think that a college degree or credential beyond high school leads to better economic outcomes and quality of life, according to a 2023 survey conducted by the Helios Education Foundation, a nonprofit that advocates for college access.

Low in-state tuition, combined with generous state grants like Bright Futures, make Florida's public colleges and universities among the highest returns on investment in the nation, according to analysis from Third Way.

Graduates from the University of South Florida can expect to make roughly double that of a high school graduate for half the cost of the average four-year school, according to U.S. Department of Education data on students who received federal student aid.

Most Hillsborough Community College students earn $10,000 more than the median high school graduate in Florida and pay less than $5,000 per year after student aid, according to federal data.

Communicating that economic payoff can be challenging, but Hillsborough Community College is working to find ways to reach nontraditional students, said Ray, the school's head of student services.

It's expanded dual-enrollment programs to bring in current high school students and launched workforce programs for adults in emerging fields like financial technology and artificial intelligence. The school is also working harder to help former students who left without a degree return.

The school recently launched a free linesperson course in partnership with Tampa Electric, Ray said.

"In four months, you can be earning $60,000 a year," he said. "That's a family-sustainable income that can have intergenerational change."

Despite the state's low cost of attendance and promise of higher earnings, college still feels out of reach for many Floridians.

Two-thirds of survey respondents said they didn't feel college was affordable for them or their family, according to Helios. Since 2020, the share who said going to college would be a good financial decision fell by 7 percentage points.

Part of that may have to do with the state's soaring cost of living. Broader societal concerns that all Floridians face — inflation, cost of housing and insurance — are woven into the decision to attend higher education, said Dave Sobush, director of research and policy at the Florida College Access Network.

"It's why we need to look at need-based grants and emergency aid, so a $200 expense doesn't stall somebody's post-secondary education," he said.

Ian Hodgson is an education data reporter for the Tampa Bay Times, working in partnership with Open Campus.

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