

Hiep Nguyen

From: Ellen Plendl
Sent: Monday, June 27, 2022 8:06 AM
To: Consumer Correspondence
Subject: Docket No. 20220000
Attachments: FPL never-ending shenanigans ongoing electrical utility industrial sector machinations;
Consumer Inquiry - Florida Power & Light Company

See attached customer correspondence and reply for Docket No. 20220000.

Hiep Nguyen

From: Beatrice Balboa <beatricebalboa@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, June 25, 2022 7:33 AM
To: Ellen Plendl
Subject: FPL never-ending shenanigans: ongoing electrical utility industrial sector machinations
Attachments: Nate Monroe_ FP&L's strategic JEA gifts.pdf; A Florida power company didn't like a journalist's commentary. Its consultants had him followed _ Florida _ The Guardian.pdf; Florida's dark money playbook_ How 'ghost' candidate scheme revealed secretive political tactics – Orlando Sentinel.pdf; FPL consultant obtained research on Jacksonville journalist Nate Monroe.pdf

Saturday 25 June 2022 0730 hours

Ellen Plendl
Regulatory Consultant
Florida Public Service Commission
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach
1-800-342-3552 (phone)
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to express my ongoing deepest disappointment that the electrical utility industrial sector continues to mismanage the electrical infrastructure throughout the State of Florida despite given unfettered access to elected and appointed government officials and agencies in the furtherance of policies and agendas in pursuing poorly thought out sourcing of energy resources and a decidedly anti-consumer stance with the rate-paying public across the board. Ongoing investigations continue undercover the long-standing practices by these captains of industry to extract ever larger fees and electrical rates to aggrandize their oversized ambitions by direct and indirect political arrangements in backrooms.

The attached documentation clearly indicates the lengths that the electrical utility industrial sector continues to pursue to ensure their monolithic position in the electricity sector in the State of Florida.

Please place these observations and articles in the appropriate docket to underscore the overwhelmingly calculated cold-hearted manner that these captains seem to influence the very elected/appointed representatives that should, instead, be seeking to comfort their constituents day-to-day hardships to pay for the aggrandizement of these out sized economic sectors.

Thank you for your time in these matters and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Beatrice Balboa
1010 South Ocean Boulevard, Unit 1008
Pompano Beach, FL 33062-6631
USA

Hiep Nguyen

From: Ellen Plendl
Sent: Monday, June 27, 2022 8:04 AM
To: 'Beatrice Balboa'
Subject: Consumer Inquiry - Florida Power & Light Company

Ms. Beatrice Balboa
beatricebalboa@gmail.com

Dear Ms. Balboa:

This is in response to June 25 email to the Florida Public Service Commission (FPSC) regarding Florida Power & Light Company (FPL).

We will add your feedback and the articles you shared to our public record.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at 1-800-342-3552 or by fax at 1-800-511-0809.

Sincerely,

Ellen Plendl
Regulatory Consultant
Florida Public Service Commission
Office of Consumer Assistance & Outreach
1-800-342-3552 (phone)
1-800-511-0809 (fax)

Nate Monroe: Dear FP&L, it's not really charity if you get something out of it

[Nate Monroe](#) Florida Times-Union

COMMENTARY | Florida Power & Light's high-powered team of Jacksonville lobbyists and consultants — assembled to support the company's bid to purchase JEA — met in the summer of last year to brainstorm which charities the massive utility company might give to that are close to the hearts of Jacksonville City Council members.

The company specifically honed in on two nonprofits led by City Council members Rory Diamond and Ju'Coby Pittman as potential recipients for \$10,000 and \$25,000 donations (both have said they received no money or word from the company about these plans). Florida Power & Light also identified a third nonprofit run by City Councilman Reggie Gaffney as a "stakeholder," along with a handful of politically influential churches in the city and well-known environmental groups.

Those details were included in a batch of documents one of Florida Power & Light's former consultants, Sam Mousa, turned over to a special City Council committee investigating the failed JEA privatization effort. They offer an unusually detailed and candid picture of how one of Florida's largest companies and most powerful political forces wins support in a community: Money.

The documents detail a savvy strategy aimed at financially boosting not just nonprofits connected to elected officials — who would have to formally sign off on any purchase agreement for JEA — but also high-profile projects that seemed likely to generate positive headlines and goodwill with the city's business class.

Florida Power & Light was also considering donations of \$25,000 to help revitalize the former site of the now-demolished Jacksonville Landing on the city's waterfront, as well as a "\$50,000+" contribution to an "innovation corridor" on Bay Street in downtown. One Florida Power & Light spreadsheet noted that Mayor Lenny Curry, JAX Chamber CEO Daniel Davis and Jaguars owner Shad Khan "are all primary drivers" of the innovation corridor project.

In addition to the planned community giving, Florida Power & Light's parent company at various times employed some of the city's best-connected lobbyists and consultants, including Susie Wiles, who is running President Donald Trump's re-election campaign in Florida, as well as people with ties to the mayor, including Mousa (his former top staffer) and Tim Baker, his political consultant.

NextEra, Florida Power & Light's parent company, submitted the highest bid to purchase JEA, totaling more than \$11 billion, though it fought the public disclosure of that figure for months in

court.

A Florida Power & Light spokesman, David P. Reuter, told my colleague, Christopher Hong, the company's charitable giving in Jacksonville predates the JEA privatization campaign and would continue in the future. The spokesman was also highly critical of the Times-Union's coverage of the company and said the documents paint a "dangerously narrow snapshot" and that it would not comment on "cherry-picked" information.

"NextEra Energy participated ethically and responsibly in the JEA ITN process and we continue to cooperate with the ongoing investigations," Reuter said.

He also suggested my colleague "take your conspiracy theory hat off for two seconds and do some actual reporting."

But utility industry and government watchdogs have accused the company of possessing more cynical motives for its charitable giving.

The Energy and Policy Institute, a watchdog group that advocates for renewable energy and clean technology, found in a December 2019 report that NextEra was among a group of large utility companies that used its charitable giving to "buy support for its proposals from civic groups and charitable operations." In 2016, for example, amid a request from Florida Power & Light for a rate increase, several speakers who appeared before the industry's state regulatory body, the Public Service Commission, were connected to nonprofits that had received contributions from the company.

In the realm of government, through the use of massive political contributions spread throughout the state, the strategy is even more straightforward. Integrity Florida, a state government watchdog group, concluded in 2017 the Public Service Commission qualifies as a "captured agency" — one that has been co-opted by the interests it's designed to regulate.

"The utilities regulated by the PSC have a high degree of influence on the Governor and the legislature through political contributions and lobbying and have used that influence to pursue favorable regulatory decisions by the PSC, at the expense of the public," the group said in a December 2017 report.

FP&L's braggadocio about its community involvement in other areas of the state often leaves out this unflattering reality: Its donations to good causes appear to have generated a meaningful return on investment.

Making a sale worthwhile

Florida Power & Light's strategy of strategic generosity in Jacksonville mirrored one employed by JEA's own executives to offer massive financial incentives to its employees (in the form of accelerated pension payments and lucrative "retention" agreements), the city government (through a one-time windfall of cash) and the public (through rebates worth hundreds of dollars per customer) that made approving the sale too rewarding to turn down.

It was a crucial strategic insight to overcome the plain reality that the public has generally had starkly negative opinions of proposals to privatize the century-old, city-owned electric, water and sewer utility.

The formal solicitation for bids issued by JEA also encouraged companies to grease the wheels. Points were awarded for "community stewardship," which included a willingness to make charitable contributions and "commitments" to the city.

Florida Power & Light also courted important civic and political figures by showing up in their favorite playground: The company rented out a suite for two Jaguar games last year.

"Again, they wanted to raise their profile and meet the movers and shakers in the city," Mousa, the FP&L consultant and former mayoral staffer, told City Council attorneys in a sworn interview. "And there's no better place than to meet the movers and shakers in the city than there are at a stadium suite."

In this, the company had at least some success.

During an Oct. 27 game — a time during which JEA's official solicitation for offers had been issued — visitors in the Florida Power & Light stadium suite told a colleague and me that they saw the mayor's top administrator, Brian Hughes, wander in and speak with the company's CEO, Eric Silagy (both men told us they didn't speak about the JEA sale). Curry, the mayor, said he only recalled seeing Silagy in the hallway but that they didn't speak beyond "exchanging a mere, 'hello.'"

Added scrutiny

Florida Power & Light's connections to the mayor's orbit have drawn scrutiny. In particular, the company's past contractual relationships with the mayor's former top staffer and his political consultant — paired with information one of them acted as an informal adviser to ousted CEO Aaron Zahn up to and during the sale process — are in large part why the company's motives and actions have come under suspicion by some city officials.

The company has also drawn the notice of federal prosecutors, who singled out the company in a grand jury subpoena sent to JEA that, in part, demanded all documents related to communications

with any lobbyist connected with NextEra and FP&L.

Others involved in the effort to purchase JEA have speculated the general structure of the solicitation — the rapid timeline bidders had to submit final offers, and the lack of an opportunity to physically inspect JEA's plants and other assets before doing so — inherently benefitted FP&L because of its past partnerships with JEA on running power plants and purchase-power agreements.

"... FP&L had a lot of prior contracts and agreements with the JEA," Mousa, the former FP&L consultant and retired mayoral staffer, told City Council attorneys. "And it would not have surprised me if that would not have been an advantage to FP&L being a potential suitor of the JEA."

A Florida power company didn't like a journalist's commentary. Its consultants had him followed

Consultants for Florida Power & Light, the largest electric utility in the US, conducted surveillance on a Jacksonville journalist



Mario Alejandro Ariza for Floodlight and Annie Martin for Orlando Sentinel

Fri 24 Jun 2022 05:00 EDT

Consultants working for America's largest power company covertly monitored a Jacksonville journalist and obtained a report containing his social security number and other sensitive personal information, leaked documents reveal.

The surveillance happened after the journalist wrote critically about how [Florida](#) Power & Light (FPL) tried to sway city council members to sign off on its business plans. Text messages show an FPL executive was kept abreast of Florida Times-Union columnist Nate Monroe's movements while he was on vacation in the Florida panhandle in November 2019, an investigation by the Florida Times-Union, the Orlando Sentinel and Floodlight has found.

Nearly a year later in October 2020, the consultants also obtained a photograph of Monroe and his girlfriend at the time outside their Jacksonville-area apartment, according to records shared with reporters by an anonymous source.

FPL denies that it authorized or knew about the surveillance. But the records show employees of Matrix LLC, an Alabama-based consulting firm employed by the utility, were shadowing the journalist throughout his critical coverage of a failed \$11bn purchase of a smaller Florida utility.

In an interview with a group of Florida-based reporters in early June, Eric Silagy, the power company's CEO, denied that the company had asked the consultants to spy on any journalists.

"I have never authorized or approved or been a party to following you or any other reporter," Silagy said to Monroe and others.



📷 Eric Silagy, CEO of Florida Power & Light, told Nate Monroe he 'had never authorized or approved or been a party to' having the journalist surveilled. Photograph: Bob Self/Florida Times-Union

FPL's relationship with Matrix has come under scrutiny after [reporting](#) by the Orlando Sentinel revealed Matrix operatives orchestrated a campaign to promote spoiler candidates that diverted votes from Democrats so Republicans could retain control of the Florida senate. FPL denies knowledge of or involvement in that scheme.

Although surveilling journalists is commonplace in some parts of the world, it's happening more frequently in the United States, said Ted Bridis, a journalism instructor at the University of Florida. A former Associated Press investigative editor whose phone records were seized by the FBI a decade ago, Bridis said harassment of journalists is escalating, facilitated by a "new era of political divisiveness".

“The fact that this kind of behavior could be taking place in Florida, allegedly by people with ties to the largest energy company, should shock the conscience,” he said.

FPL has said a law firm reviewed its work with Matrix and found no evidence of wrongdoing by the utility’s employees, but FPL has refused to share the report or its findings.

The documents revealing the surveillance were sent to the Times-Union and shared with the Orlando Sentinel and Floodlight. The documents include a series of text messages to FPL’s vice-president of state legislative affairs, Daniel Martell, that show an apparent coordinated effort to follow Monroe while he was on vacation.



**The fact that this kind of behavior could be taking place in Florida, allegedly by people with ties to the largest energy company, should shock the conscience
Ted Bridis**

Monroe had been a frequent critic of FPL’s efforts to privatize and purchase Jacksonville Electric Authority, a community-owned electric, water and sewer utility. FPL, which controls the territory surrounding Jacksonville, has long coveted the utility.

FPL spokesman David Reuter said in an emailed statement his company had “no digital record of these exchanges and cannot prove their veracity”. He argued they may not be authentic, or could be incomplete, taken out of context or “manipulated to make FPL look bad”.

“Taken individually or collectively, none of the information you have in your possession demonstrates any wrongdoing by FPL or our employees,” Reuter said.

Reuter would not point to specific details in the documents that he thought might be false. FPL has repeatedly accused journalists of unfairly covering the company.

FPL alleges the documents are being released to reporters by Joe Perkins, who founded Matrix. Perkins is locked in a legal dispute with his firm’s former CEO, Jeff Pitts, who left the company in December 2020, taking several employees and clients with him.

Perkins declined to say whether he is the source of the documents leaked to journalists but verified that the records are legitimate. He confirmed that Matrix was able to locate the records on Pitts’ former laptop. Perkins blames Pitts and other “rogue” employees for the surveillance.

He denied directing anyone to spy on Monroe.

“I had no knowledge that it ever took place until I saw the material on Jeff Pitts’ computer,” he said.

In a statement responding to questions from the Times-Union about the records, Pitts’ attorney John Collins accused Perkins of “leaking partial and misleading confidential client documents”.

“For years, Joe Perkins directed and paid for the surveillance of individuals – in many cases, without client knowledge or approval – and he often leveraged this information for whatever suited his needs regardless of ethical boundaries,” Collins said. “This is one of the many reasons Jeff left Matrix.”

The documents, which were sent to the Times-Union by an anonymous source, show that Matrix was monitoring Monroe’s activities on 9 November 2019, when the Times-Union columnist was in Pensacola for a friend’s wedding.

That day, Monroe posted a photo on Twitter of himself and his girlfriend in front of a mural that featured the city’s name prominently – clearly depicting his whereabouts. Hours later, after his alma mater Louisiana State University defeated rival University of Alabama in football, Monroe tweeted, “OK. Time to get drunk.” According to leaked text messages, which Perkins said were found on Pitts’ computer, someone at Matrix sent a screenshot of the tweet to FPL’s Martell at 7.34pm Eastern time.

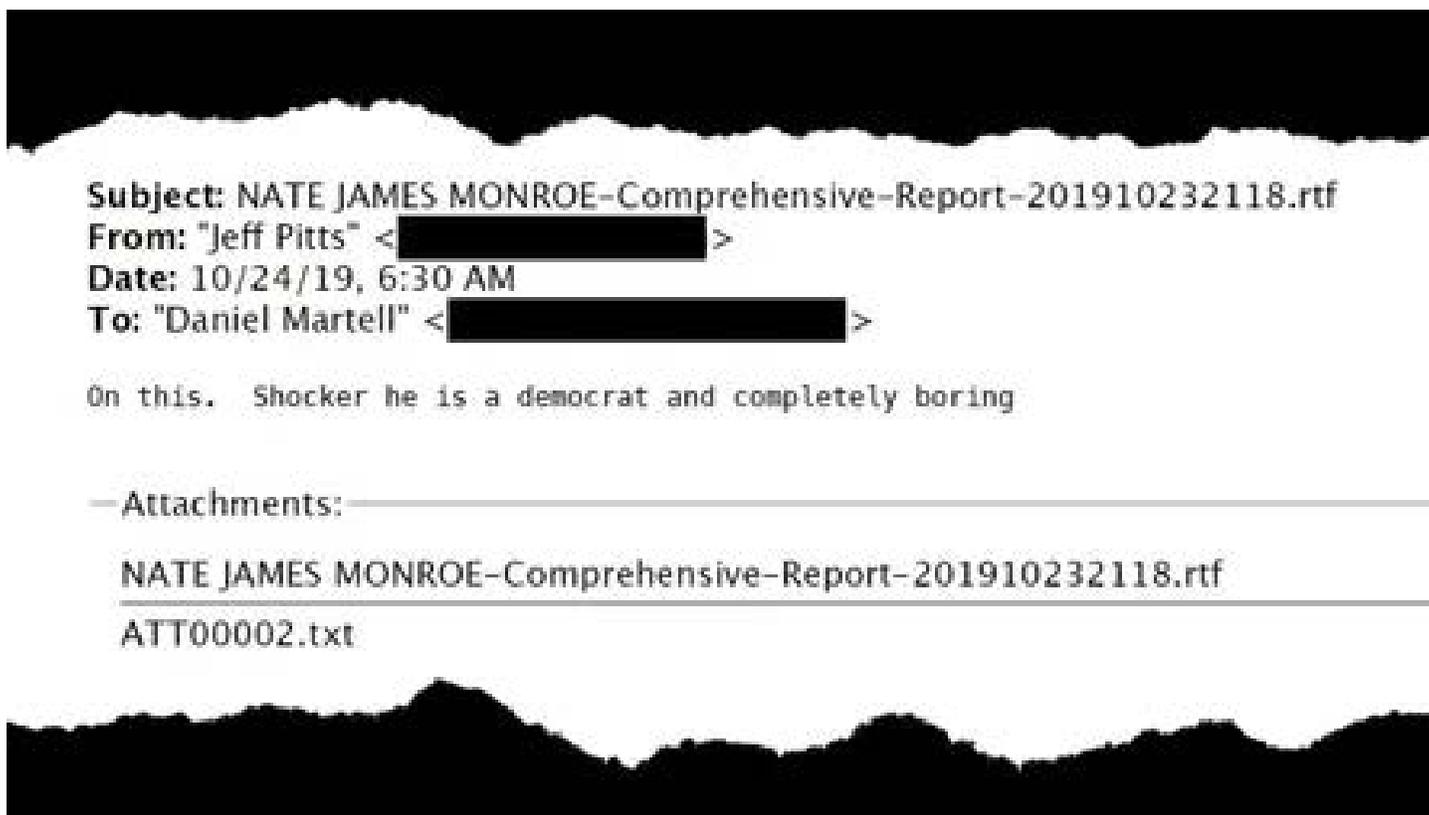
“Awesome,” Martell responded a minute later.

Sometime later the Matrix operative texted Martell, “He’s in an Uber.” The operative then added a frowning emoji. The text lines up with Monroe’s rideshare receipt from that evening.

Documents obtained by the Times-Union also included a photo taken of Monroe while he was walking his dog with his then-girlfriend near their Jacksonville-area apartment. The photo, dated 14 October 2020, was taken days after Monroe [published a column](#) about how FPL the summer before had planned to direct donations to charities led by members of Jacksonville’s city council. Those members would have to sign off on a JEA sale. The plan was never executed.

Another email dated 24 October 2019 between Pitts, the Matrix CEO, and Martell, the FPL employee, contained a comprehensive background report on Monroe that featured sensitive personal information, including his social security number.

“Shocker, he is a Democrat and completely boring,” Pitts wrote of the columnist in the documents.



 An extensive background report on Nate Monroe included sensitive personal information. Photograph: Florida Times-Union

It’s unclear who was monitoring Monroe’s movements, how frequently, or what they hoped to gather. But Matrix records previously obtained by the Orlando Sentinel show the firm paid more than \$10,000 in 2018 to Clear Capture Investigations, a private investigation firm in Gainesville that touts “political/corporate surveillance” as one of its specialties.

The firm has not responded to a request for comment.

FPL argued Matrix may have ordered the report for a different client and said it had no record of receiving such a report.

“If Matrix sent such a report to FPL, it was sent unsolicited,” Reuter said. “If we wish to learn more about a journalist, we consult publicly available sources such as social media, the internet and other information which is readily available to any member of the public.”

Observing or photographing someone in a public place or collecting information about them isn't illegal, said Clay Calvert, a professor of law at UF.

“It's the intimidation that's the problem,” he said.

But Calvert said surveillance would discourage few journalists from writing critical stories and such behavior might entice other reporters to rally around one of their peers.

“It's clearly bad public relations to try to intimidate journalists,” he said.

Florida's dark money playbook: How 'ghost' candidate scheme revealed secretive political tactics

By Jason Garcia and Annie Martin

Orlando Sentinel • Dec 30, 2021 at 11:31 am

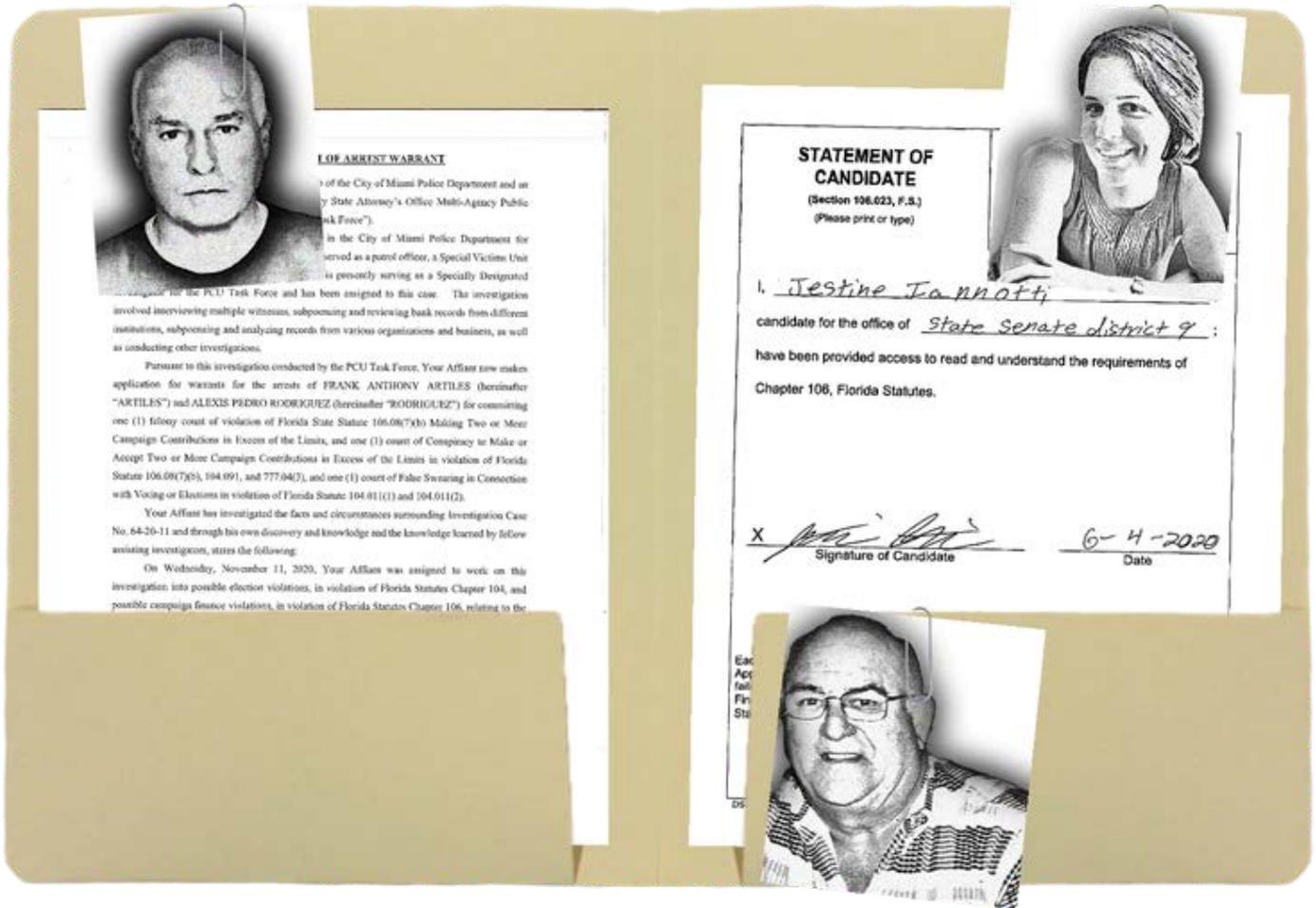


Last year, less than a month before Election Day, voters in Seminole and Volusia counties who would help decide one of the closest state Senate elections in Florida began receiving mailers touting a little-known independent candidate: Jestine Iannotti.

The mailers featured a stock photo of a Black woman, promised a candidate free from the influence of special interests who would “change the politics in Tallahassee,” and emphasized her focus on social justice, climate change and campaign finance reform.

It was pure fiction.

Iannotti is a white woman who was already planning to move to Sweden. The mailers were designed by Republican strategists in Tallahassee. And the dark money that financed the ad campaign was controlled by consultants working closely with utility giant Florida Power & Light — whose corporate lobbyists were privately rooting for the Republican candidate and eventual winner of the race, Sen. Jason Brodeur of Sanford.



The “ghost” candidates were (from left) Alex Rodriguez, Celso Alfonso and Jistine Iannotti. Rodriguez, who ran in District 37 and had the same last name as the Democratic incumbent in that race, was the most successful, drawing more than 6,000 votes in an election ultimately decided by just 32. He has since pleaded guilty to accepting a bribe to enter the race and been sentenced to probation. The others have not been accused of wrongdoing. (Jeff Weiner / Orlando Sentinel)

Iannotti was one of three so-called “ghost candidates” used by Republican consultants last year to help tip the scales in three key Senate races, helping the Republican Party retain control of the 40-member Florida Senate. The scandal has set off a sprawling and still-ongoing criminal probe that has led to the arrests of two people.

But this was not an isolated incident.

AD

A months-long investigation by the Orlando Sentinel has found that some of the architects of Florida's ghost candidate scheme have guided behind-the-scenes campaigns to tilt elections and influence public policy all across the state.

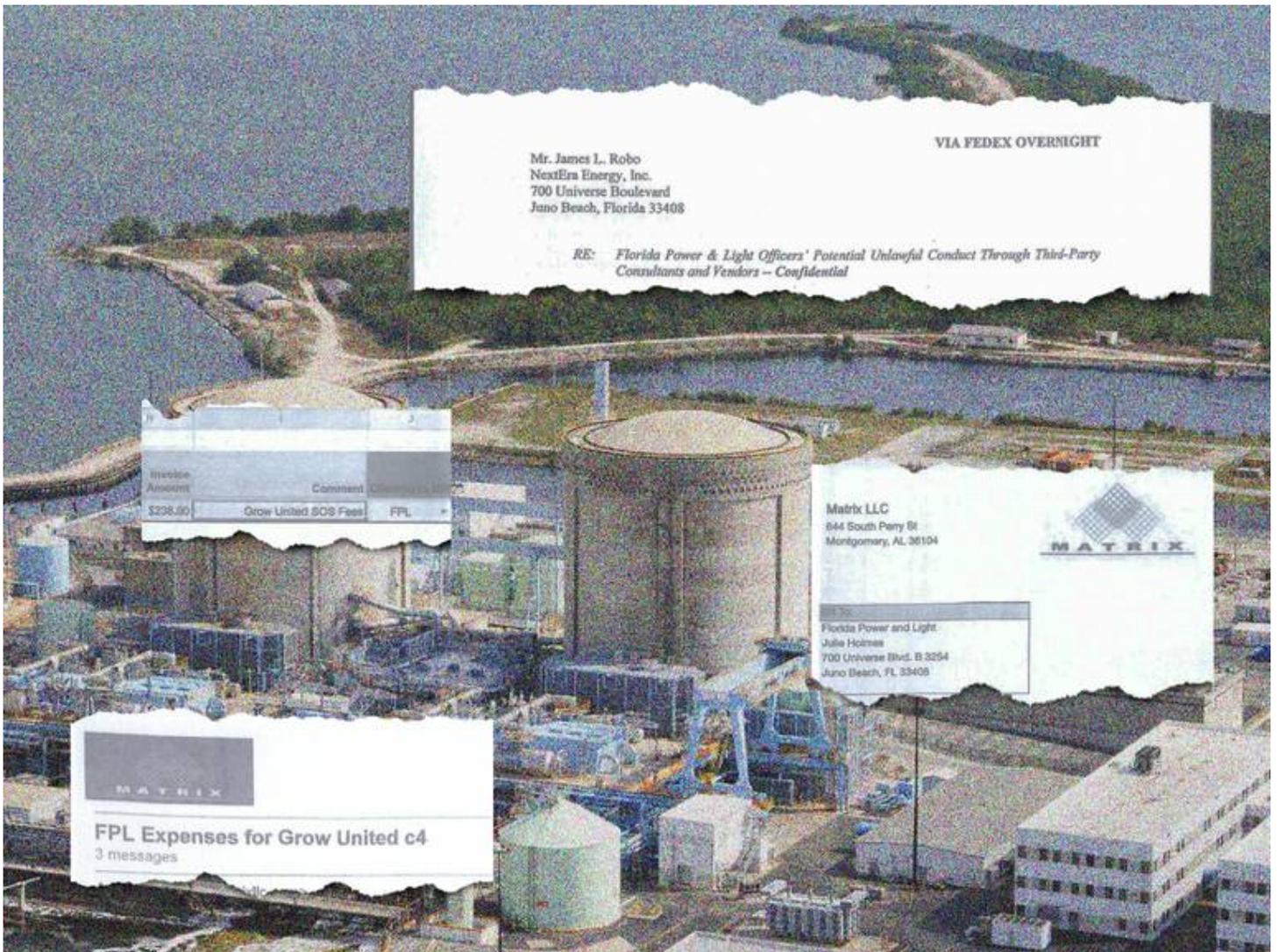
Their work often involves many of the same deceptive methods used in last year's Senate races — passing money through daisy chains of dark-money groups, paying friends and family members to help cover their tracks, setting up sham grassroots groups and even intimidating opponents.

The strategies have been revealed through a criminal investigation by prosecutors in Miami-Dade County — and by a bitter falling-out between political operatives who had been working for some of Florida's largest companies, including FPL, sugar-grower Florida Crystals and phosphate-miner Mosaic Co.

Many details of the tactics — and the financial connections that link those using them — were exposed in late November, when the Orlando Sentinel was anonymously delivered a cache of checks, bank statements, emails, text messages, invoices, ledgers and more, covering the work of political consultants to FPL over a roughly four-year period between 2016 and 2020. FPL has denied its employees had any role in the ghost candidate scheme.

What has emerged from this flood of disclosures is something akin to a playbook: a collection of tactics and strategies deployed from the Panhandle to Miami to sway elections for everything from mayor to state senator, resist efforts to reshape Florida's Constitution — and advance the interests of some powerful corporations.

[[Interactive explainer: How dark money fueled Florida's 'ghost' candidate scandal](#)]



Documents obtained by the Orlando Sentinel show that top Florida Power & Light executives worked closely with the political consultants who orchestrated a scheme to promote spoiler candidates in three key state Senate elections last year.

Dark-money daisy chains

Crucial to the dark-money playbook is an elaborate network of vaguely named entities, many of which don't have to disclose their donors, allowing operatives to covertly funnel money into elections — large and small — across the state.

As the mayor of South Miami, Phil Stoddard presided over a city of just 12,000 people when, in early 2018, his reelection campaign drew a blizzard of vicious dark-money attacks worthy of a governor's race.

One mailer, paid for by a committee called "SM First," ridiculed Stoddard as "King Phil" and accused him of spending public money for "personal vendettas." Another depicted an edited image of Stoddard alongside infamous sex offenders Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein.

At the same time, another political committee called “A Better Miami Dade” produced ads that quoted a South Miami commissioner claiming Stoddard had assaulted her and robocalls that featured a recorded message from the commissioner. And a third political committee, “Justice for Florida,” sent out ads promoting Stoddard’s opponent.

All three of those committees were financed by separate dark-money nonprofits controlled by people working at the time at an Alabama-based political and consulting firm called Matrix LLC, according to the records obtained by the Sentinel.

One ledger shows more than \$150,000 in spending related to “South Miami” in January and February 2018.

One of Matrix’s clients at the time was FPL. Stoddard had clashed with the utility giant repeatedly: He’d fought FPL efforts to run above-ground transmission lines through the city, criticized the company’s plans to build new nuclear reactors at a nearby power plant and championed an ordinance that made South Miami the first Florida city to require every new home be built with solar electricity-generating panels.

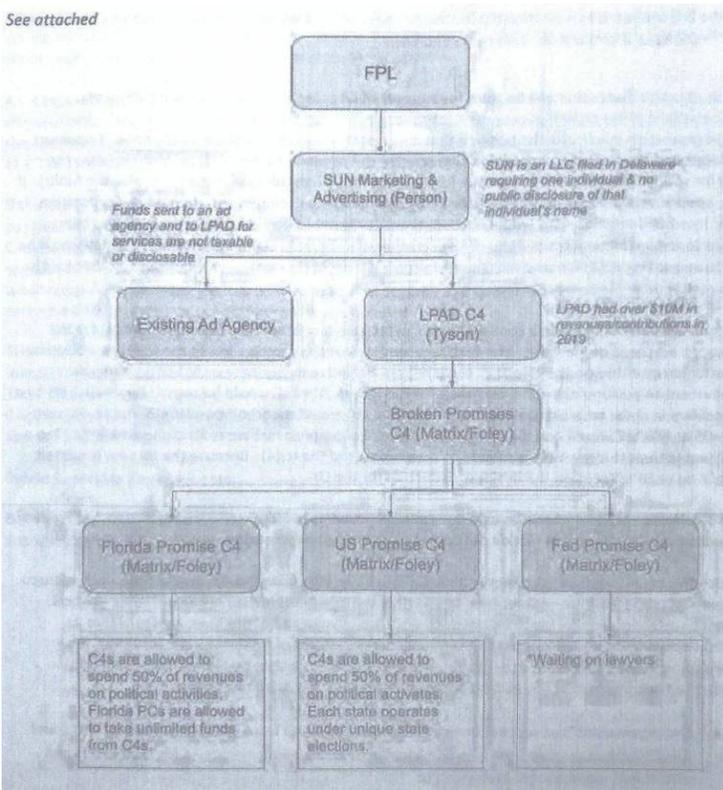
David Reuter, a spokesman for FPL, acknowledged the company was engaged in the effort to defeat Stoddard. “Like many Americans and most companies, FPL participates in the political process because nearly every aspect of our business is impacted by policy decisions at every level of government,” he said.

Matrix LLC has since sued several former employees, including its ex-CEO Jeff Pitts, accusing them of conspiring with FPL’s parent company — NextEra Energy Inc. — to work on secret projects and cheat Matrix out of fees.

Matrix owner Joe Perkins said he could not comment on Matrix’s activities in Florida, because of the litigation and also because the work Matrix does for clients is confidential. But Perkins said generally that most of the Florida activities the Sentinel asked about were overseen by the former employees, without his knowledge.

Pitts has founded his own Florida-based consulting company called Canopy Partners with FPL as a client. He did not respond to requests for comment, though he has countersued Perkins, denying Matrix’s allegations and accusing his former boss of trying to extort him.

See attached



This flowchart, depicting how money from Florida Power & Light could flow through a network of entities to obscure its origins, was included in a memo sent by Matrix LLC CEO Jeff Pitts to FPL CEO Eric Silagy at an alias email account in November 2019. There's no proof the funding plan was ever put into use.

Stoddard, who stepped down as South Miami's mayor in 2020, said he expected to be attacked during his reelection, especially because he'd been such a vocal FPL critic. But he said the steps taken to conceal who was ultimately behind the attacks surprised him.

"They went to crazy machinations," he said.

Friends and family as fronts



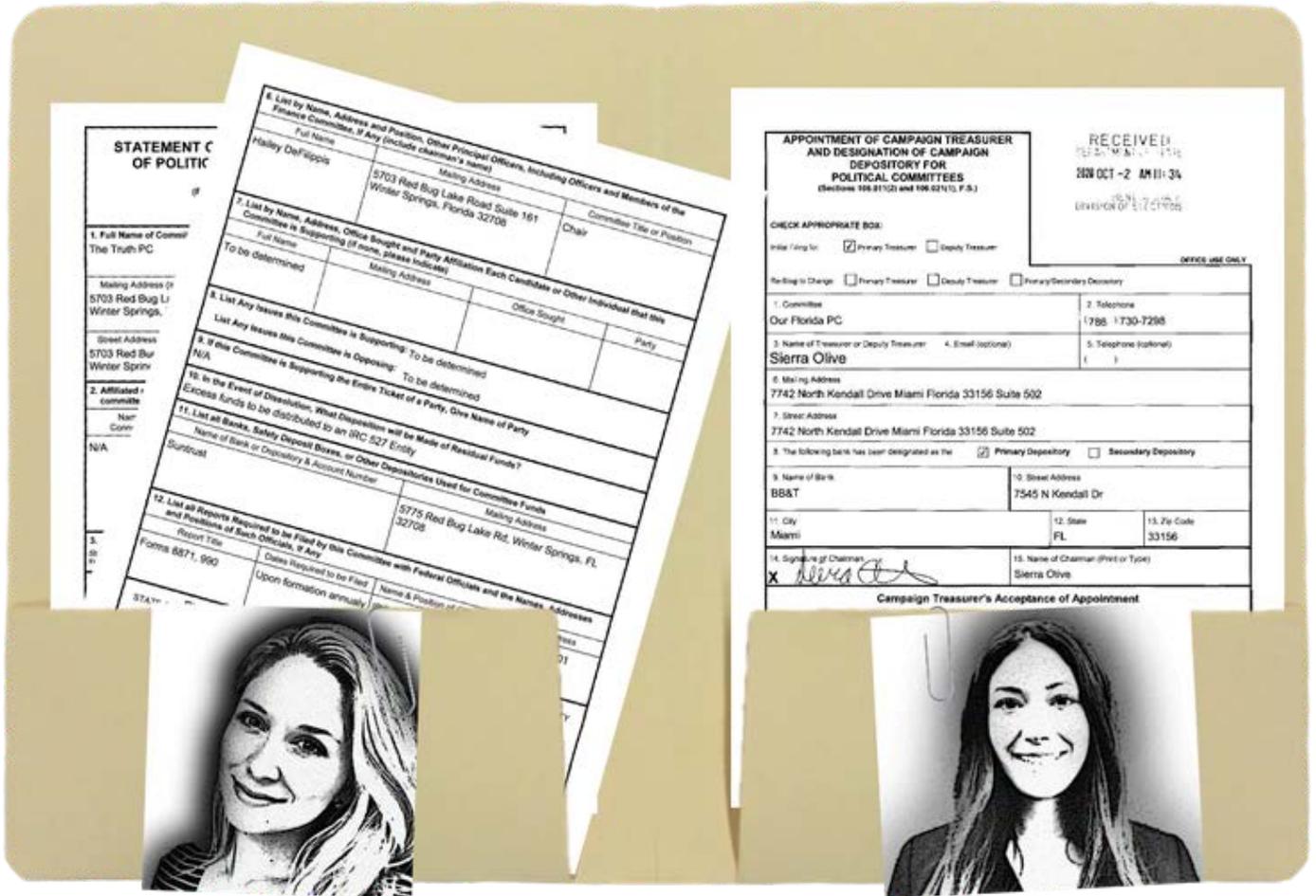
Alex Alvarado (left), created two political committees to commission ads promoting last year's "ghost" candidates. Both committees were addressed at the Tallahassee headquarters of big-business lobbying group Associated Industries of Florida. Alvarado is an associate of Ryan Tyson, a former AIF vice president whose nonprofit, Let's Preserve the American Dream, funneled money into the dark money entity that provided all of the funding Alvarado used on the ads. (Jeff Weiner / Orlando Sentinel)

While dark-money nonprofits and anonymous political committees can hide the ultimate source of their donations, they must disclose some limited information to the public, like the name of a chairperson or treasurer.

But operatives can fill those roles with friends, relatives or even minor acquaintances — even if that person is not actually doing anything to justify the title.

The mailers that promoted Iannotti to Volusia and Seminole voters, as well as two similar independent candidates in South Florida Senate races, were sent by two political committees: Our Florida and The Truth.

The names of two young women appeared on the paperwork for those committees. But it has since emerged that Alex Alvarado, then a Republican political operative, was really running the committees.



Two Palm Harbor residents, Hailey DeFilippis (left) and Sierra Marie Olive were listed in state election division filings as the chairs for a pair of political committees — “The Truth,” which sent mailers promoting Jestine Iannotti in Senate District 9, and “Our Florida,” which promoted Alex Rodriguez and Celso Alfonso in districts 37 and 39, with nearly identical ads. But DeFilippis and Olive weren’t responsible for crafting those ads – both were paid for the use of their names and told they’d have no responsibilities. (Jeff Weiner / Orlando Sentinel)

“Want to know if you want to be a chair for a political committee,” Alvarado texted Sierra Olive, his wife’s former college roommate, on Sept. 22, 2020, according to records obtained by South Florida prosecutors. “You don’t do anything and make \$2k.”

Olive, then 23, was unemployed and living with her grandparents in the Tampa Bay area. After she agreed to let Alvarado use her name on the paperwork for Our Florida, Alvarado sent the committee registration forms to her by FedEx.

“Feel free to call me if you need help figuring out where to sign,” Alvarado wrote to Olive Sept. 24.

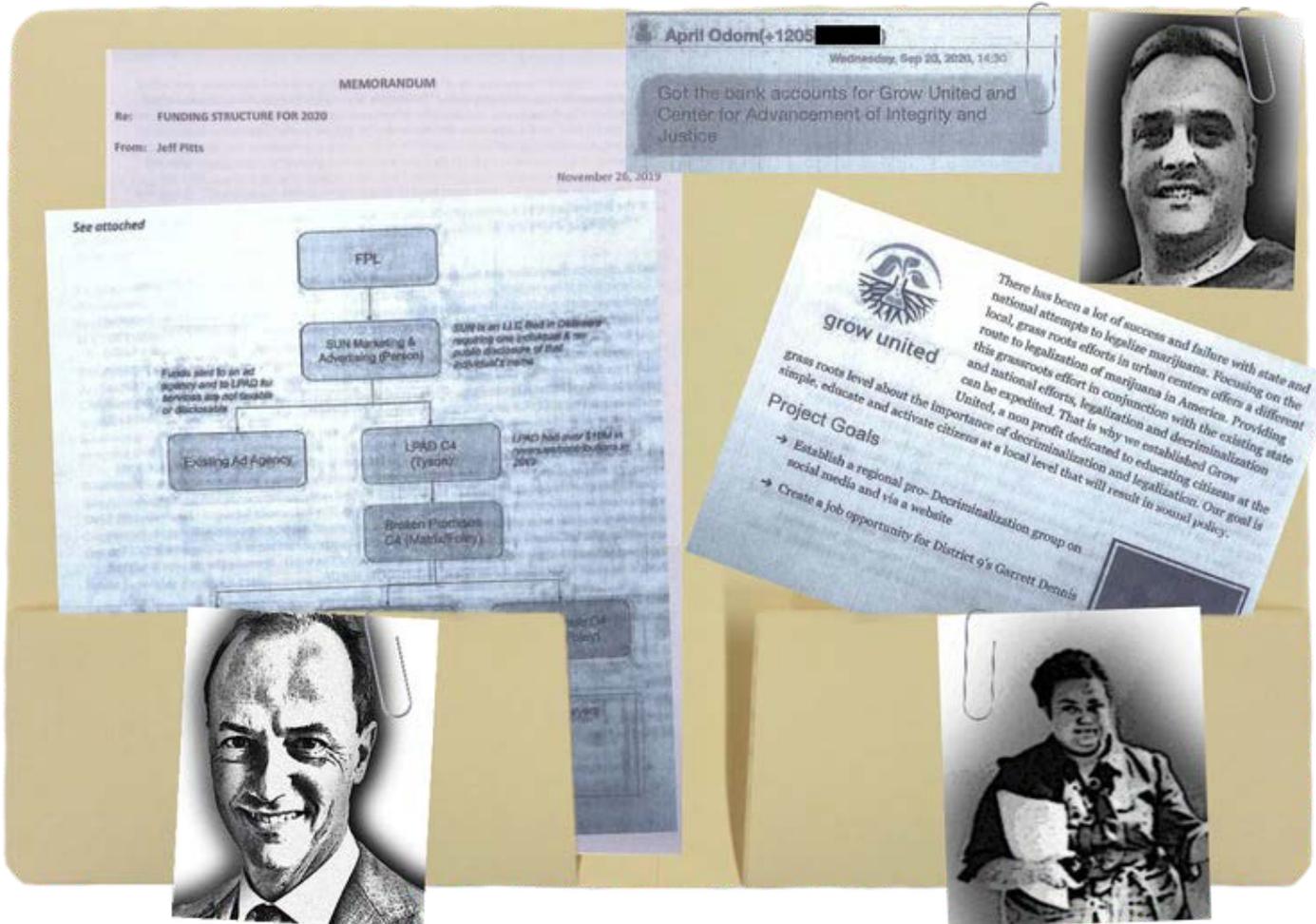
Hailey DeFilippis, [the high school classmate of a Tallahassee lobbyist](#) who is friends with Alvarado, agreed to put her name on the paperwork for The Truth. DeFilippis was a 25-year-old college student and had just

learned she was pregnant in September 2020 when Alvarado offered her \$1,500 to front the political committee.

Believing her work was done after she signed the paperwork, DeFilippis told investigators last December she was alarmed when reporters started calling with questions about her role in the Senate election

“So, I called him and I was like what’s going on?,” DeFilippis said, adding that Alvarado soon gave her another \$2,500 — compensation, she said, for the stress of being flooded with questions by reporters. “I thought I didn’t have any role in this basically.”

The Truth and Our Florida got all their funding — \$550,000 — from a dark-money nonprofit called Grow United, which listed Richard Alexander as its chairman. But Alexander, a 42-year-old resident of Cullman, Ala., apparently played no role in sending that money.



The "ghost" candidate ad campaign was funded by a dark-money nonprofit named “Grow United,” which was controlled by operatives for an Alabama-based political consulting firm called Matrix LLC. Among them were the company’s then-CEO, Jeff Pitts (left), and April Odom, a former spokesperson for Birmingham’s mayor whose brother, Richard Alexander, was listed as the nonprofit’s chairperson. After the 2020 elections, Pitts and Odom departed Matrix and created a new firm in Florida, Canopy Partners. (Jeff Weiner / Orlando Sentinel)

Instead, his sister, ex-Matrix LLC operative April Odom, sent the checks to Alvarado, asking him to confirm he received the money four days later, according to text messages obtained by the Sentinel.

Stephanie Egan, Odom's sister, appears on the official paperwork for Mothers for Moderation, a nonprofit behind attacks against Kayser Enneking, a Democrat who ran for a Gainesville-area Florida Senate seat 2018. Those ads painted Enneking as "an out of touch millionaire."

But there's no evidence Egan, an elementary school teacher in Tuscaloosa, Ala., was actively involved in running Mothers for Moderation.

Odom signed the organization's checks in late 2018 and early 2019, according to Matrix internal documents. Alexander's home address appears on the organization's bank records. And Jeff Pitts, then the CEO of Matrix, emailed the organization's bank account information to FPL CEO Eric Silagy in October 2018, anticipating a contribution, the documents show.

Alexander and Pitts did not respond to requests for comment. Odom and Egan have not responded to repeated requests.

Synthetic grassroots

Phony candidates or front people aren't the only tactics operatives in Florida use that can mislead voters. They also co-opt or create organizations that from the outside appear to represent grassroots movements.

In early 2018, for instance, a newly created nonprofit now known as "Women Together Now" began organizing against Paul Tudor Jones II, a billionaire hedge fund investor who is one of the largest donors to The Everglades Foundation.

[In staged protests and letters to members of Congress](#), Women Together Now demanded Jones resign from the board of the Everglades Foundation, citing Jones' close friendship with Weinstein, the disgraced former movie producer and convicted sex offender.

About two years later, another new entity, "Truth About the Everglades," began attacking Kimberly Mitchell, then director of Everglades Foundation affiliate The Everglades Trust.

At the same time, a third new entity, “Our Water Our Rights,” started promoting the interests of the state’s sugar industry, which was battling Everglades activists over water levels in Lake Okeechobee, a badly polluted body of water that is critical to the Everglades ecosystem.

Records show all three entities — Women Together Now, Truth About the Everglades and Our Water Our Rights — had links to Matrix, which at the time counted sugar grower Florida Crystals Corp among its clients.

Women Together Now is publicly led by a civil rights activist from Alabama but was controlled by former Matrix employees, according to the records sent to the Sentinel. Meanwhile, Truth About the Everglades and Our Water Our Rights were both started by the same man who led Grow United — and whose sister was working for Matrix.

Representatives for the three organizations did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did representatives for Florida Crystals.

But Mitchell said she thinks all three groups were used to make it appear there was widespread, grassroots support for the sugar industry in its fight against environmental regulations.

“Tobacco and oil — they all do the same thing,” Mitchell said. “They all follow the same playbook.”



Audience members hold signs that read JEA Not For Sale before a special council meeting Wednesday, February 14, 2018, called by Mayor Lenny Curry to discuss the sale of JEA to the private sector. (Will Dickey--/Will Dickey)

Another grassroots-seeming group linked to Matrix emerged in 2017, just as a push was beginning in Jacksonville to privatize the city's publicly owned utility, JEA. The new group, "Fix JEA Now," began promoting the privatization campaign.

According to three people, Fix JEA Now was started and led by Rev. DeVes Toon, a national field director with the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network. And the records obtained by the Sentinel show entities controlled by the former Matrix employees paid Toon more than \$180,000 in 2018 — with some of the payments explicitly for work related to JEA.

Toon did not respond to requests for comment.

Similarly, in 2019, when a petition drive was underway for a constitutional amendment that would have ended Florida's system of regional monopolies for utility companies, a new group was formed to oppose the initiative called "Floridians for Affordable Reliable Energy."

The organization was publicly led by Democrats — including former state Rep. Joe Gibbons of Broward County who said FARE “was a coalition of progressive organizations and grassroots donors that I have known.”

IRS records show 99% percent of the group’s funding came from a trio of dark-money nonprofits, all controlled by consultants working for FPL, which was one of the leading opponents of the deregulation petition drive.

Ethics complaints and PIs

Dark-money nonprofits and other operative-run entities can influence elections in ways beyond paying for mailers or organizing rallies — they also can be used to dig up dirt or sow doubt about opponents.

In mid-September of last year, an organization in Alabama called “Jobkeeper Alliance” announced it had filed an ethics complaint against Alissa Jean Schafer, a member of the Soil & Water Conservation District in Broward County.

Schafer is also the research and communications manager for the Energy and Policy Institute — a watchdog group that is often critical of corporate utility companies such as FPL. Jobkeeper’s complaint accused Schafer of illegally hiding the source of her and EPI’s income on the financial disclosure forms she was required to file as an elected official.

Jobkeeper is a pro-energy industry nonprofit that says it is “committed to fighting the radical efforts of job-killing environmentalists.” Records show it has received money from entities associated with Matrix and other FPL consultants — as have a pair of niche political news websites in Alabama and Florida that published stories about the complaint within days of the announcement.

One headline read: “Broward County official slapped with ethics complaint for falsifying source of income.”

Though the ethics complaint was eventually dismissed, FPL executives [have cited the investigation when defending the company against criticisms from Schafer and EPI.](#)

Kim Adams, the executive director of Jobkeeper Alliance, said her organization has no relationship with Matrix “other than work on some of the same issues in the same venues, and from time to time, using some of



Alissa Jean Schafer

Matrix’s graphics, other communication services and administrative support.”

“Our activities are not dictated by any outside party,” she said.

Representatives for the sites, The Capitolist and Alabama Today, could not be reached for comment.

Reuter, the FPL spokesperson, said FPL didn’t have anything to do with the ethics complaint, although he said FPL is one of “multiple entities” who have concerns about Schafer and what he said was a conflict of interest between her role on Broward County’s soil-and-water board and her position with EPI.

Schafer described the ethics complaint as “an attempt at intimidation and bullying” meant to smear her and quiet other potential critics.

“It makes it easier for corporations to do whatever they want and get away with it when folks are too scared to hold companies accountable — and acts like this can go a long way in keeping somebody quiet,” she said.

The operatives have also used private investigators.

The records obtained by the Sentinel show entities controlled by the former Matrix employees paid more than \$10,000 in 2018 to Clear Capture Investigations, a private investigation firm in Gainesville whose specialties include “political/corporate surveillance.”

It’s not clear what the payments were for. But in 2017, the firm’s founder and president, Derek Uman, [was caught on video](#) planting a camera in the hallway of a Tallahassee condo building where a number of state legislators live during the legislative session.

In January 2018, surveillance footage from the same hallway where Uman had installed his camera was posted to an anonymous website alleging an affair between two state senators, which they then admitted.

One of the payments Matrix operatives made to Uman's company — for \$2,700.85 — is dated Jan. 31, 2018.

Uman did not respond to repeated requests for comment. [But he told the Miami Herald and Tampa Bay Times](#) in 2018 that he was not the source of the video footage posted to the website exposing the senators' affair.

Nathan Skop, a former member of the Public Service Commission, told the newspapers that Uman had also followed him in January 2016, shortly before Skop was scheduled to testify against FPL's parent company — NextEra Energy Inc. — in a hearing in Hawaii, where NextEra was trying to acquire Hawaiian Electric Industries Inc.

Skop declined to comment to the Sentinel. Uman denied ever following Skop or working for FPL to the Times and Herald. Reuter said FPL has never employed Uman's firm.

How it all comes together

There aren't many people in Florida who have felt the full wrath of these tactics more than Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, a Democratic politician who has clashed with some of Florida's biggest business interests — including both FPL and Florida Crystals.



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In 2017, when Daniella Levine Cava was a Miami-Dade county commissioner, an anonymous website and Facebook page launched — “Keeping Up With Cava” — depicting her as a wealthy and out-of-touch elitist. Records show the site was funded in part by entities controlled by the former Matrix employees.

In 2017, when Levine Cava was a Miami-Dade county commissioner, an anonymous website was launched — “Keeping Up With Cava” — depicting her as a wealthy and out-of-touch elitist and attacking her for everything from crime in her commission district to Miami’s response to hurricane cleanup.

“The truth is that while she pretends to be one of us, Cava is the richest official in Miami-Dade government,” the website claimed.

Records show the site was funded in part by entities controlled by the former Matrix employees, which also paid for everything from Facebook advertising to “monitoring” of Levine Cava, though it’s unclear what that entailed.

The next year, when Levine Cava ran for reelection against a former Republican state legislator, her race drew an unusual third candidate — a then-33-year-old named Jonathan Burke who had never run for office before and who, [according to the Miami Herald](#), had been arrested several times in the past.



Danielle Levine Cava is mayor of Miami-Dade County.

Burke, who could not be reached for comment, told the Herald he worked as a “researcher.” He [reported a \\$60,000 salary](#) on his financial disclosure form — from an Alabama company run by a former Matrix employee.

Levine Cava won reelection in 2018 and then decided to run for county mayor two years later. The four-way race, pitting Levine Cava against a more moderate Democrat and two Republicans, [drew millions in spending from dark-money groups](#) — much of it aimed at stopping Levine Cava.

For instance, a newly created company called “True Progressives LLC” spent an estimated \$1.4 million or more on mailers attacking Levine Cava. Records show True Progressives was led by another former Matrix employee.

Levine Cava said anonymous, dark-money attacks like the kind she’s faced in recent years sow confusion, distrust and cynicism among voters. And that, in turn, erodes public confidence in elections.

“That’s what is so disconcerting, whether it happens to me or anybody else,” Levine Cava said. “It is truly corrosive, and it’s something that really tarnishes our democracy.”

'Unsettling,' 'un-American': FPL consultant obtained personal information, surveillance photo of journalist Nate Monroe



David Bauerlein

Florida Times-Union

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An Alabama consulting firm that worked for Florida Power & Light during the attempted sale of JEA possesses records on Florida Times-Union columnist Nate Monroe that show extensive research into his personal life and indicate he was under surveillance in the fall of 2020, according to records leaked to the Times-Union in recent weeks.

The batch of leaked records included a photo of Monroe and his then-girlfriend that was taken without their knowledge while they walked their dog just outside their home.

The owner of Matrix, a firm that has a roster of political and corporate clients, said he didn't know about the background report or the photo until a search found them on a computer server that stored files of former employees who were acting without his authorization. The owner, Joe Perkins, said the records that had been leaked to the Times-Union were authentic.

The document for the background report on Monroe shows the then-CEO of Matrix emailed it to FPL's vice president of state legislative affairs in October 2019. FPL said it did not find any records of the utility receiving the report or the photo. The utility said it has not sought that that kind of information on journalists and does not condone gathering it.

Nate Monroe: Surveillance records at the heart of a tangled mess between FPL and a former consultant

Money & Power: Inside the campaign to privatize JEA

The roots of sales attempt: City Council investigative report links Mayor Lenny Curry to failed JEA sale

The documents show an unusual degree of interest in the non-work activities of Monroe, a metro columnist who has been at the forefront of covering the attempted sale of JEA and the investigations

that followed the collapse of the sales process.

“It’s really un-American to be surveilling journalists,” University of Florida journalism instructor Ted Bridis said.

He said the activities probably are not illegal unless they were meant to intimidate or interfere with Monroe’s constitutionally protected rights as a journalist, which would fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Justice authority to investigate. Even if it was legal, it’s still “just really creepy,” Bridis said.

Jacksonville University Public Policy Institute Director Rick Mullaney said opposition research that hunts for embarrassing information has long been used in political campaigns to attack candidates, but he’d never heard of similar research of a Jacksonville journalist.

“If the media becomes the subject of this kind of research, will that have a potential chilling effect on journalists doing the job they need to do?” Mullaney said. “I do find it unsettling and I do find it concerning.”

Times-Union Executive Editor Mary Kelli Palka said “it’s disturbing to learn about the surveillance of Nate. It’s simply unacceptable.

“To be clear, however, we won’t allow any tactics to stop us from continuing to pursue the truth about what happened during the JEA sale process,” Palka said.

That 72-page background report on Monroe delved into his financial history, his political party affiliation, the names and phone numbers of his relatives and neighbors, his unredacted Social Security number, the make of his car, his driver’s license and license plate numbers, and places where he’d lived since childhood, according to documents sent anonymously to Monroe.

The photo, which has an October 2020 timestamp, shows Monroe talking to his girlfriend, whom he later married, during a stroll in a Neptune Beach neighborhood where he was living at the time. Neither was looking toward the camera when the photo was snapped.

In a third document sent to the Times-Union, a text message observes that Monroe is taking an Uber ride on a November 2019 day when he was in Pensacola for a friend’s wedding.

FPL said in a statement it does not surveil reporters, and if it wants to learn more about a journalist, it uses sources that are “readily available to any member of the public” such as social media and the Internet.

Related: Law firm that advised on botched JEA sale also helped former FPL consultants on dark-money projects

Eric Silagy, the CEO of FPL, told Monroe during an interview with reporters at the Times-Union office that FPL never directed anyone to watch him.

“I wanted to come up in person because it’s important for you to hear directly from me that we did not engage at all in any illegal activities,” Silagy said as he sat at a conference table with Monroe and other reporters. “We did not engage in any activities having to do with following people like you, Nate, or taking pictures.”

He said FPL’s only aim has been to “make sure we understand what you’re writing and reporting, and when it’s not accurate, to make sure that we give you a response.”

The documents with references to Monroe are the latest batch of anonymously sent records that have connections to Matrix.

The Times-Union and the Orlando Sentinel jointly reported last December that Matrix records revealed a proposal by the firm in mid-2019 to offer City Council member Garrett Dennis a job with a marijuana decriminalization organization, thereby removing from council a staunch opponent of privatizing JEA.

FPL has said it was aware of the plan but the utility’s officials “flatly rejected it,” an assertion Silagy repeated when he fielded questions from reporters at the Times-Union’s office.

“It never even rose to me because we don’t do business that way,” Silagy said of the decision.

FPL, which no longer contracts with Matrix, said it reviewed emails, cell phones and computer files to see if the utility had the background report on Monroe, the photo of Monroe or the text message referring to an Uber ride in its company records or any employee’s personal accounts. FPL said it found none of those.

Monroe frequently broke news on the potential sale of JEA, which would have been a blockbuster deal shaping Jacksonville for decades to come.

He wrote columns critical of the sales process and developed a broad array of sources for the newspaper’s coverage that drew praise and scorn from elected officials and community leaders. FPL has called the reporting “conspiracy-laden” as it relates to the utility’s bid for JEA.

The Times-Union stands behind its coverage of the attempt to sell JEA, Palka said.

“The investigative reporting Nate and other Times-Union journalists did during the JEA sale helped remind our community about the importance of a free press,” Palka said.

NextEra Energy, the parent company of FPL, submitted the high bid of \$11 billion after the JEA board decided in July 2019 to put the utility up for sale. JEA canceled all bids that December after a City Council Auditor’s report in November revealed a JEA incentive plan would have paid hundreds of millions of dollars to JEA employees if a sale happened.

After the FBI investigated that incentive plan, a federal grand jury indicted ousted JEA CEO Aaron Zahn and former chief financial officer Ryan Wannemacher on fraud charges. Each pleaded not guilty in March.

Before the sales process fell apart, Matrix CEO Jeff Pitts emailed a lengthy background report on Oct. 24, 2019 with the subject line “Nate James Monroe – Comprehensive Report,” according to the document.

“On this. Shocker he is a democrat and completely boring,” the email from Pitts said, according to the document.

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The Oct. 23 report on Monroe found no criminal or traffic records, bankruptcies, liens or judgments among the many areas examined.

The document shows Pitts, who left Matrix at the end of 2020, sent the report to the personal email of Danny Martell, the vice president of state legislative affairs for FPL.

FPL said it has no record of an email about a background report on Monroe and “therefore cannot determine the veracity of the document.” FPL said it would not commission such a report on a journalist.

Matrix “has many clients and it’s more than plausible to believe that such a report was commissioned by one of those other clients,” FPL said. “If Matrix sent such a report to FPL, it was sent unsolicited. To be clear, we have no record of receiving such a report from Matrix or anyone else.”

Two weeks after the email of the background report, Monroe traveled to Pensacola for a Nov. 9, 2019 wedding and posted an “OK. Time to get drunk” tweet after his alma mater Louisiana State University defeated Alabama in a football game.

The document provided to the Times-Union of text messages shows that someone made a screenshot of the tweet by Monroe and texted it on the same day, and then sent another text that said, “He’s in an Uber” with a sad-faced emoji.

Monroe did use an Uber service that day, according to a receipt for the ride he boarded in front of the house where he had watched the football game during a wedding reception.

The document shows a phone number used by Martell as the recipient of multiple texts from Oct. 8 to Nov. 17, 2019 including the “He’s in an Uber” text.

FPL said in a statement it did not find records of the Uber text or any other texts contained in the document. Martell willingly provided his phone for that review, FPL said.

“Unfortunately, we have no digital records of those exchanges and cannot prove their veracity,” FPL said, adding it found “inconsistencies” in the text messages that raised questions about whether the exchange had been “altered in some fashion.”

The third document that shows a photo of Monroe has a time-stamp nearly a year later on Oct. 14, 2020. Monroe said he had not seen the photo before the Times-Union received it and it shocked him that someone had taken the photo without him knowing it.

The photo did not have any other documents attached to it that would indicate who took it or had seen it.

Monroe’s then-girlfriend is standing with her back to the camera as she holds the dog’s leash, and Monroe is standing sideways while talking to her. Monroe said he’s familiar with the spot because it’s where he took the dog on daily walks.

Perkins said the examination of the computer server in the Birmingham office of Matrix found other photos of Monroe. He declined a Times-Union request for those photos.

The photo’s time-stamp is two weeks after Monroe wrote an Oct 1, 2020 column about records – obtained by a Jacksonville City Council investigative committee – that said FPL was considering possible contributions in 2019 to non-profits run by City Council members. JEA had told bidders that their “community commitment” through activities like charitable giving would be part of the criteria for evaluating bids.

FPL chief communications officer David Reuter submitted a guest column that ran in the Times-Union the following day and criticized the “conspiracy-laden” coverage by the newspaper of FPL’s bid to purchase JEA.

Mullaney, who worked decades in city government before becoming director of the JU Public Policy Institute, said criticizing coverage falls squarely within the traditional relationship between media organizations and those they cover.

“You can criticize an article, you can criticize a point of view, you can even say they have bias,” Mullaney said. “Those things are all fair game.”

He said “looking into someone’s personal background, looking at surveillance photographs, looking up who their neighbors are, that’s far beyond that.”

Interviewed at the Times-Union office, Silagy said Perkins, the owner of Matrix, has been giving documents to Florida reporters in an orchestrated campaign to tarnish FPL and put pressure on Pitts, who is locked in a legal battle with Perkins over lawsuits filed in Jacksonville and Alabama.

Silagy said Perkins is “very skilled at trying to manipulate public opinion” and reporters should “consider the source.”

Silagy erroneously called Perkins a "convicted felon" several times during the course of the interview. Silagy was apparently referencing a \$5,000 civil fine the Federal Election Commission levied against Perkins in 1992 over campaign contributions made during a 1985 campaign, but an FEC spokeswoman said such a fine does not make someone a "convicted felon" because the agency only handles civil enforcement.

Perkins’ attorney put a letter in the FEC file in 1992 saying he did not admit any wrongdoing. Perkins called Silagy’s comment "false and defamatory." FPL, in a follow-up email, said Silagy "does not and did not contend that Mr. Perkins is a convicted felon."

Perkins declined to comment on Silagy’s assertion he is behind the release of documents to reporters. Perkins said he is not going to “address the question at all about how they got to reporters” but he would answer questions about the authenticity of the photo of Monroe, the background report on him and the text message.

Perkins said those match documents his firm discovered on a central computer server in the Birmingham, Ala. office where Pitts worked during his time at Matrix.

After Pitts left the firm and formed his own consulting firm, Canopy Partners, in December 2020, Perkins filed a lawsuit that contends a search of computer files at the Birmingham office showed Pitts had been running his own businesses that served Matrix clients while Pitts also was on the Matrix payroll.

Pitts then filed a lawsuit in Duval County contending Perkins threatened to release documents to reporters unless Pitts agreed to pay \$4.5 million to Perkins.

Perkins, who works out of Montgomery, Ala, said he called in an outside IT expert to remove hard drives from the Birmingham office's server. Perkins said the IT expert kept the original drives in his possession to maintain the "chain of evidence" and made copies for Matrix, which has been mining files from 2010 to 2020 and cataloguing them.

"I didn't know who Nate Monroe was until we started reading about Nate Monroe on the files that were recovered from Jeff Pitts' computer," Perkins said. "Unequivocally, not only did I never direct or authorize anyone from Matrix to surveil in any way Nate Monroe, I had no knowledge that it ever took place until we saw the material on Jeff Pitts' computers."

In response to Times-Union questions about the documents, a spokesman for Pitts said Perkins has been involved in surveillance operations.

"For years, Joe Perkins directed and paid for the surveillance of individuals – in many cases, without client knowledge or approval – and he often leveraged this information for whatever suited his needs, regardless of ethical boundaries," John Collins said.

"This is one of the many reasons Jeff left Matrix," Collins said. "Joe is now leaking partial and misleading confidential client documents in an attempt to intimidate, harass and cause intentional harm to former employees and clients as part of a multimillion dollar extortion scheme."

Matrix said in a statement that "Pitts' attempt at deflection does not deny his involvement in the surveillance of Nate Monroe. Be very clear, Matrix had no knowledge of the surveillance of Monroe."

Matrix said the alleged extortion scheme, which is part of Pitts' lawsuit, is a "baseless claim" and the firm challenges Pitts to "provide a single communication" he received from Perkins or any representative of him that promises to keep Pitts' behavior a secret in exchange for money.

Perkins said when the JEA sales process emerged, he ordered Pitts and others working on the Matrix account with FPL to avoid any involvement with JEA matters because he considered it a "direct conflict of interest" in light of relationships Matrix has with its other clients.

Perkins said Matrix has taken steps to ensure the files pulled from the computer server are archived exactly as they were discovered. He said being able to prove "nothing has been altered or doctored will be crucial, and we have gone to great lengths for more than a year to ensure the integrity of those files."

FPL no longer works with either Matrix or Canopy Partners. The utility says it parted ways with Matrix about a year ago and had not worked with Canopy for about six months.