

Bonuses nixed for St. Pete leaders

Top city officials won't get to keep the big checks from the Rays stadium deal.

BY JACK EVANS
Times Staff Writer

St. Petersburg city employees involved in the deal for a new Tampa Bay Rays stadium and surrounding development won't get to keep the big bonuses they received last week.

Mayor Ken Welch announced Monday that he had decided to rescind the bonuses, which were paid Thursday to 17 high-ranking employees and totaled \$250,000.

The bonuses started at \$10,000 and topped out at \$25,000 for the city's two lead negotiators on the deal. They were awarded to several of the city's top-paid employees.

The Tampa Bay Times first reported the bonuses Friday. In a statement issued Monday afternoon, Welch cited blowback over the news as part of his reason for nixing the payments.

"It was our intention to recognize the extraordinary work and dedication of employees central to the successful Historic Gas Plant District development agreement process," he said. "In retrospect, however, I am concerned about the alignment of this process with our governing principles, and the

See **BONUSES, 14A**

It's time to vote in Florida's primaries

Hundreds of polling places in Tampa Bay are open today from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

BY JUSTIN GARCIA
Times Staff Writer

Florida voters will get to make big decisions today about who will represent their political parties in November's general election and who will hold important roles in their communities.

Hundreds of voting precincts will be open across Tampa Bay today from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. for this year's primary elections.

Before heading to cast ballots, voters should remember that Florida is a closed primary state and the deadline to change party affiliation has passed. Only registered Democrats may vote in Democratic primary races, and only registered Republicans may vote in Republican primary races. Those races will determine which candidates run in the general election.

But any registered voter may cast a ballot in nonpartisan races, such as those for judges

See **PRIMARIES, 14A**



California delegate Matthew J. Rothschild shows his support for the Kamala Harris/Tim Walz ticket with his festive hat on the first night of the Democratic National Convention on Monday in Chicago. BRYNN ANDERSON | Associated Press

2024 Democratic National Convention

Biden passes baton to Harris

The first night was designed to cement the transition from the incumbent to the nominee.

BY FARNOUSH AMIRI,
STEVE PEOPLES, ZEKE MILLER
AND BILL BARROW
Associated Press

CHICAGO — A refreshed Democratic Party gathered Monday night for a valedictory speech from President Joe Biden, whose decision to end his reelection bid released newfound energy with Vice President Kamala Harris' rise to the top of the ticket.

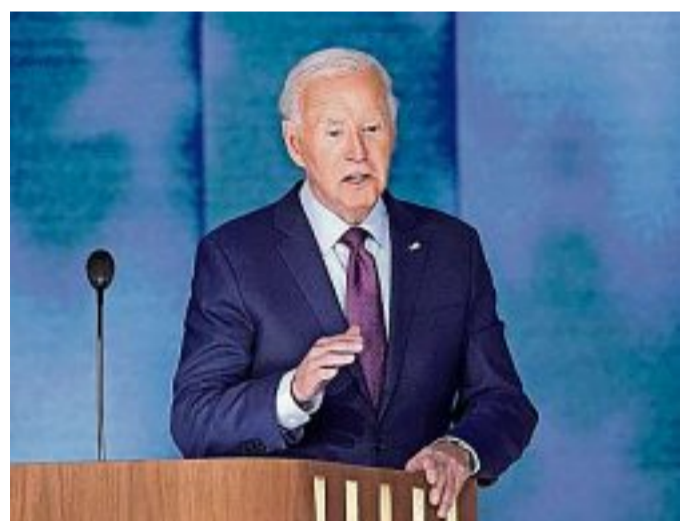
The Democratic National Convention that began Monday in Chicago holds particularly high stakes for the party one month after an unprecedented mid-campaign switch from Biden to Harris. The opening night was designed as a handoff from the incumbent to his hand-picked successor — albeit four years before he intended for her to follow him.

Democrats are looking to the weeklong event to sling-shot Harris toward a faceoff with Republican Donald

Trump, whose comeback bid for the White House is viewed by Democrats as an existential threat. Having taken over the ticket just one month ago, Harris must now win over a divided country that is viewing her more positively but still making up its mind about the election.

Beyond the convention's celebrations, the event comes as a pivotal moment for the party and its new nominee. A false step could hobble Harris at a moment when her candidacy has been enjoying a burst of money, momentum and even joy. And real questions loom about the depth of Harris' newfound support, the breadth of her coalition and the strength of her movement.

Not even a month ago, Democrats were deeply divided over foreign policy, political strategy and Biden himself, who was holding on after



President Joe Biden gets ready for his speech on Monday. J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE | Associated Press

a disastrous debate by claiming he had a better chance than any other Democrat — including Harris — of beating Trump.

At morning meetings prior to Monday's prime-time programming, convention delegates were dressed head to toe in merchandise celebrating Harris and her running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. Some wore the vice president's face on their scarves or her slo-

gans on graphic tees. Walz suggested at a meeting of the Hispanic Caucus that Harris had reset the race.

"People don't just want to vote against something. They want to vote for something," he said. "Kamala Harris has given you something to vote for."

Part of introducing Harris and Walz was first giving a graceful exit to the

See **CONVENTION, 14A**

Appeals court rules for Hillsborough schools in tax case

The ruling clears the way for voters to see a school tax referendum on the Nov. 5 ballot.

BY MARLENE SOKOL AND SUE CARLTON
Times Staff Writers

Hillsborough voters will get to decide on the question of higher property taxes to supplement teacher pay, an appellate court ruled Monday.

The 2nd District Court of Appeal did not go along with the Hillsborough County Commission's contention that it has discretion to move the date of the tax referendum from this November to 2026 or beyond.

While state law allows the county commission to place the referendum on the ballot, the appeals court found that this aspect of the law does not give

them discretion to modify the date. One point they found in the school board's favor was the ballot language, which specified that the tax would be collected between 2025 and 2029.

Now the decision before voters will be whether they are willing to pay \$1 per \$1,000 in taxable property value, in addition to the taxes they already pay.

School district leaders say they are relying on the tax to generate approximately \$177 million a year for operating expenses. More than 90% is earmarked for employee bonuses: \$6,000 a year for teachers and administrators, and \$3,000 for support employees.

They say these bonuses are needed to match pay rates in Pinellas, Manatee, Orange, Pasco and other nearby counties that already levy the special property tax. The tax would remain in effect for four years, and after that it would come before the voters again.

Opponents on the county commission and on the school board argued that residents were already suffering too much from escalating housing costs.

A political action committee called Hillsborough Students Deserve Better, chaired by county PTA volunteer Ellen Lyons, has already begun a campaign to promote the tax.

"I am so delighted. I am so pleased," Lyons said Monday. Now, she said, "we get to work. We are going to design a grassroots cam-

paign to educate voters on the importance of having high-quality teachers in front of students every day."

Rob Kriete, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, said he is "ecstatic to know this has a legitimate chance to help our students and our schools. We look forward to educating the community on how it will affect them, how it will positively affect our local economy and, most importantly, how it will help our students."

Superintendent Van Ayres applauded the ruling. "What we always wanted from the beginning was for our Hillsborough County voters and residents to make the decision," he said.

School officials were caught by

See **RULING, 13A**

Scattered showers
8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.
82° 86° 88° 85°
50% chance of rain
More, back page of Sports
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