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# Lake City Reporter

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## Tree slices home in half

Resident: 'So glad we weren't here when it happened.'

By **KAYLA LOKEINSKY**  
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Watching the Thomas family smiling and chatting in their Lake City home Wednesday morning, you would never know there was a giant oak tree lying in the middle of their bedroom.

Sanel Thomas, her husband Eddy, and their children Andrey and Jozelyn Brinson packed away photographs and clothes, preparing to leave the home they rented for three years.

They had lost plenty in the last few hours, but it didn't dampen their spirits.

All that mattered was that nobody — especially a 9-month-old baby who'd been scheduled for a nap in a bed now crushed under the weight of splintered wood — had gotten hurt.

"It was in God's hands," Sanel Thomas said.

Just after 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Sanel was getting ready to lay her goddaughter, 9-month-old Larayah Walker, in her bed when her daughter got called in to work at the Lake City Mall and needed a ride.

By the time Sanel and little Larayah got back

**TREE** continued on 3A



Photos by **SAM BURROUGHS**/Lake City Reporter



**ABOVE:** A tree is pictured Wednesday after it fell during a severe thunderstorm Tuesday and crashed into a home in East Gate Village off Pinemount Road in Lake City. No one was home at the time.

**LEFT:** The tree, one of four that fell in the Thomas family's backyard, sliced the home in half, totaling one of the bedrooms.

## Storms included hail and 60-mph winds

Lake City got 2 inches of rain in about 30 minutes.

By **SAM BURROUGHS**  
sburroughs@lakecityreporter.com

An intense thunderstorm in Lake City on Tuesday afternoon caused structural damage to at least three homes in East Gate Village and left county roads lit-

tered with tree limbs.

Storm clouds began gathering around 3 p.m. and did not abate until after 6:15 p.m. with the heavy rain and hail starting around 5:30 p.m. About 2 inches of rain fell in approximately 30 minutes.

Estimated wind gusts were 60 mph, according to the National Weather Service of Jacksonville. The weather service said that small hail was also reported. The

windshield of a car on State Road 47 was struck by hail, resulting in about a 2-foot crack.

But the real damage was in East Gate Village, a mobile home community off Pinemount Road. A home rented by Eddy and Sanel Thomas was destroyed by a large oak tree that split the structure in two. (See related story above.)

A large tree also collapsed the front deck of the home of Ava

Casto on Tuesday night. Casto did not know how severe the damage was until she woke up Wednesday morning. "I was shocked," she said.

Kate Guillet, meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Jacksonville, said pea-size to penny-size hail was documented. A severe thunderstorm warning was issued for the county.

**STORM** continued on 3A

## Witt: 'This is probably going to be my last one'

Former commissioner, who's battling lung disease, will host peanut boil Saturday.

By **CARL MCKINNEY**  
cmckinney@lakecityreporter.com

Kenneth Witt's annual peanut boil has brought together his friends and family members since the early '60s. Now, it will be his chance to say goodbye to the peo-

ple in his life.

"My lungs are deteriorating fast," he said. "I can tell it's getting worse every day."

The next peanut boil will be Saturday at Witt's house, 1277 SE County Road 349, from 4 p.m. until it gets dark. The event is

open to the public.

Six hundred or more people are expected to show, he said, to enjoy peanuts, live music and camaraderie.

The occasion also marks Witt's 83rd birthday. With his failing health, he doubts he'll live to see his 84th.

"This is probably going to be

**WITT** continued on 2A



Former Columbia County Commissioner Kenneth Witt

## EMS pact to Century again

Public meeting omitted from county calendar.

By **CARL MCKINNEY**  
cmckinney@lakecityreporter.com

For the second time, Jacksonville-based Century Ambulance was the top choice for an Emergency Medical Services contract with Columbia County.

An EMS ranking committee chose the company in a meeting Wednesday afternoon.

The county commission still has to vote to begin negotiations with the company.

Century CEO John Glover said the committee put substantial research into choosing his company.

"I'm humbled and thrilled," he said. "Once again, it feels good."

Glover said he was surprised there were no reporters at the meeting, especially since he called earlier that day and was told it was public.

The meeting was omitted

**EMS** continued on 3A

## Trump jumps ahead in Fla.

Real estate mogul leading 42 to 39 percent.

By **JIM SAUNDERS**  
The News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — In a major shift from last month, a poll released Wednesday shows Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump overtaking Democrat Hillary Clinton in the key swing state of Florida.

In a head-to-head matchup, Trump leads Clinton by a margin of 42 percent to 39 percent in Florida, erasing the Democrat's eight-point lead in June, according to the poll conducted by Quinnipiac University. Trump also

**TRUMP** continued on 3A



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**LOCAL**  
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robotics team, 5A.

**RIGHT:** A large tree and a shed were damaged Tuesday night in Lake City resident Ava Casto's backyard during a severe thunderstorm. Casto didn't know the severity of the damage until she woke up Wednesday morning.



Photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY/Lake City Reporter

## STORM

Continued From 1A

Shayne Morgan, Columbia County Emergency Management Director, confirmed with the weather service that there was no tornadic activity.

"This is the first time I remember it being like this out here," Morgan said. "A lot of damage has to do with us getting hit with bad storms back to back."

Another strong thunderstorm hit the county on Monday.



An oak tree uprooted by Tuesday's storms rests in the yard of Elise Populin's home on the corner of Jupiter Glen and Wood Gate Terrace in Lake City. Her family's trampoline also blew over.



A large tree collapsed the front deck of Ava Casto's home on Tuesday night. "I was shocked," Casto said.

## TREE

Continued From 1A

home, the bedroom was destroyed.

"I almost laid my god-daughter down in that bed," Sanel Thomas said. "I'm so glad we weren't here when it happened."

As she made her way home from the mall, Sanel wasn't sure what had happened.

Columbia County Fire Rescue had blocked off their street to remove fallen power lines and an exploded breaker box after a severe thunderstorm tore through the county.

East Gate Village, a mobile home community off Pinemount Road, was littered with debris, and trees were ripped from their roots throughout the neighborhood.

The Thomas family's home suffered the worst damage.

From the end of the block, all they could see was a fallen tree. Sanel said she had no idea the damage it had done.

"I just thought, 'Oh, OK, a tree fell down,'" Sanel Thomas said. "When they finally let us into our house, I just fell and started crying. The closer I got, the worse it got."

Eddy Thomas was the first one to enter the home. When he walked in, he saw a huge oak tree that had once stood in their backyard had crashed into their bedroom. He turned to his wife and said, "You don't want to go in there."

The family spent Wednesday morning packing what was left of their belongings into boxes.

Spirits remained high.

They joked with neighbors, asking if any of them needed a tree, since they had plenty, including four that had fallen over in their backyard. They also joked



KAYLA LOKEINSKY/Lake City Reporter

A large tree is pictured Wednesday after it crashed through the awning of a mobile home in East Gate Village on Tuesday night after a thunderstorm. Several trees were uprooted during the storms.

"It is a sexy dress," Sanel Thomas said, smiling back.

The family had been renting a trailer home at 154 SW Jupiter Glen for three years. After the tree crashed into their home Tuesday, Sanel Thomas called Lebron, who immediately drove up from Orlando to help.

"I am just so grateful to God that [no one was] in that bed," Lebron said. "It's just amazing how God knew that."

The American Red Cross was able to give the Thomas family \$600, but they aren't sure what they're going to do next.

"They don't have a place to stay so that money could be gone in a heartbeat," Lebron said.

about the items they were packing away.

"Mom, do you want this dress?" Sanel Thomas asked her mother, Carmen Lebron, while holding up a

short white lace dress she had worn to her daughter's quinceanera.

"Are you kidding? I can't wear that!" Lebron replied with a laugh.

## TRUMP

Continued From 1A

leads by a margin of 41 percent to 36 percent when Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein are added to the mix.

Peter A. Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Poll, said one factor could be the recent controversy surrounding Clinton's use of a private email server and handling of classified information while she served as secretary of state.

The Department of Justice decided against

prosecuting Clinton, but FBI Director James Comey publicly criticized her for being "extremely careless."

"While there is no definite link between Clinton's drop in Florida and the U.S. Justice Department decision not to prosecute her for her handling of e-mails, she has lost ground to Trump on questions which measure moral standards and honesty," Brown said in comments accompanying the poll results.

Trump's lead in the head-to-head matchup is within the poll's 3.1 percent age-point margin of error.

Clinton led in Florida by

a margin of 47 percent to 39 percent in a Quinnipiac poll released June 21. One of the biggest shifts in the new survey involves independent voters, who favored Clinton by nine percentage points in the June poll. The poll released Wednesday indicated that Trump leads among independents by a margin of 43 percent to 30 percent.

Overall, however, the new poll again reflected deep divisions among voters based on race, gender and age. Trump dominates among white voters, men and older Floridians. Clinton holds big leads among non-white voters, women and

younger people.

Nevertheless, the poll indicates Trump has momentum as Republicans prepare to gather next week in Cleveland for the GOP national convention. Quinnipiac also released poll results Wednesday showing the candidates tied in Ohio and Trump leading by two points in Pennsylvania, both of which also are closely-watched swing states.

The Connecticut-based Quinnipiac frequently conducts polls in Florida and other states. In the latest poll, it surveyed 1,015 registered Florida voters from June 30 to Monday.

## EMS

Continued From 1A

from the county's official online calendar, where meetings are advertised to the public and press. Instead, it was announced in the request for contract proposals, or RFP, which the county released several weeks ago.

County Manager Ben Scott said a county employee likely forgot to post the meeting on the website.

"That's an oversight on our part," he said.

A previous EMS ranking committee picked Century in February, which the county voted to begin negotiations with in May.

However, a lawsuit from runner-up Lifeguard Ambulance Service alleging unfair bidding practices by the county prompted a restart of the process.

County Attorney Joel Foreman said in previous interviews the lawsuit raised valid points.

Under Foreman's advice, the county commission opted in June for a fresh start with a new ranking committee.

Lifeguard President Brett Jovanovich could not be reached immediately for comment.

Lifeguard, which has been the county's EMS provider since 2011, mounted a legal challenge to halt negotiations for the contract when Century was chosen the first time.

The county argued the lawsuit was moot since it decided to start the process over.

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