

STATE BUDGET

Senator secures \$1M for friend

Documents show Florida Sen. Aaron Bean used state budget money for launch of mental health screening pilot program

AREK SARKISSIAN
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

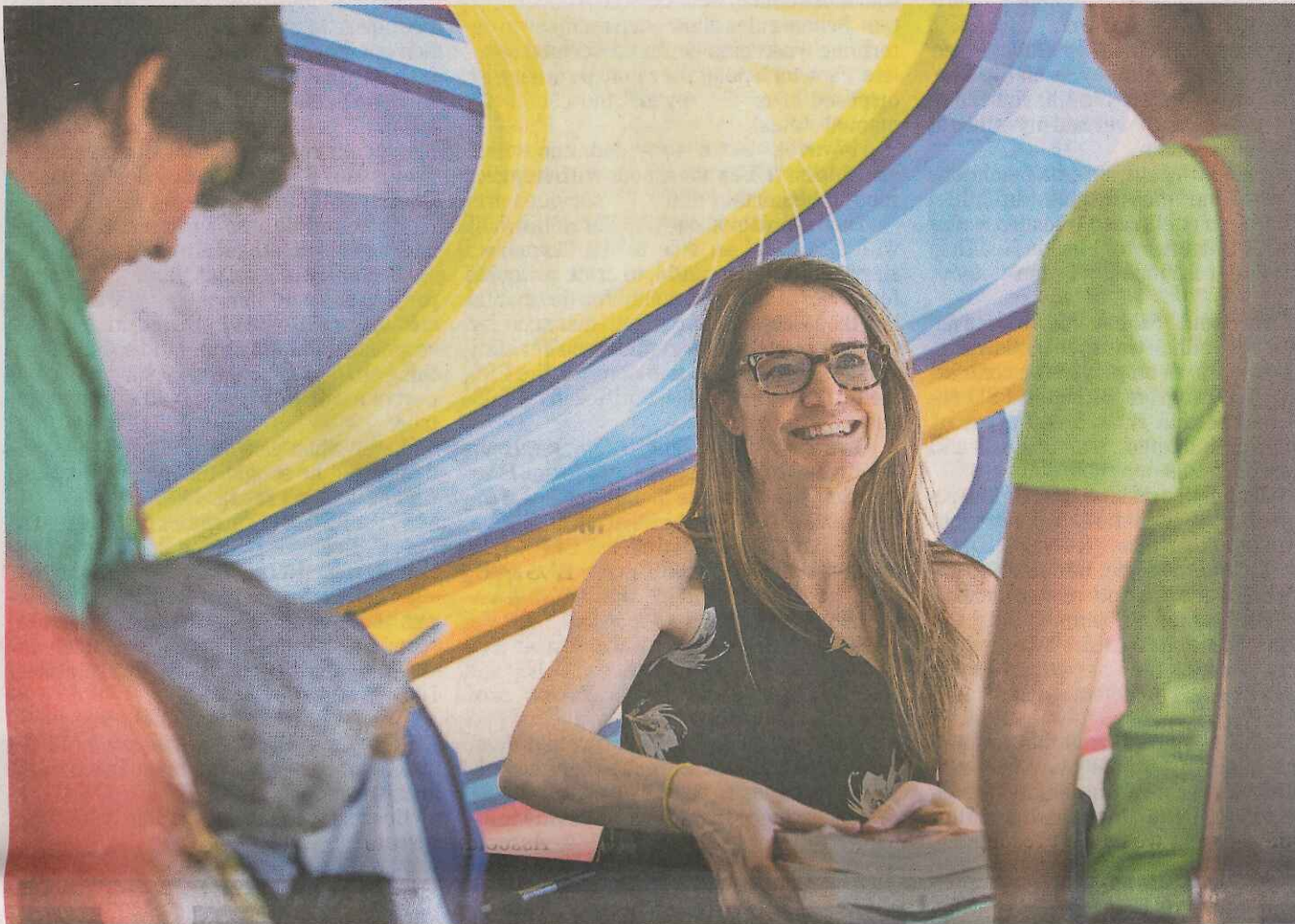
TALLAHASSEE - A state senator helped a friend's business obtain \$1 million hidden in the state budget after the two discussed how the lawmaker would promote the business, budget documents and emails show.

Sen. Aaron Bean helped secure a \$1 million special appropriation in this year's budget for an early mental health screening program run by Catherine Drew, the wife of Nassau County Tax Collector John Drew. Bean and John Drew have been friends for more than a decade, and have supported each other politically.

The Drews operate Florida Psychological Associates in Northeast Florida's Fernandina Beach. They used the state money to launch a pilot program that conducts early mental health assessments for school children and criminal defendants. Part of the pro-

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CENTENNIAL PARK



Author Sara Shepard chats with a fan while signing books at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival on Saturday at Centennial Park in Fort Myers.

AMANDA INSCORE/THE NEWS-PRESS

'Liars' author dishes at SWFL reading fest

LAURA RUANE
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Moms and dads, don't read too much into the name of this book series:

"Pretty Little Liars" doesn't encourage teens to lie.

Rather, "the books are about secrets, the power of secrets and what happens when secrets are exposed," said Sara Shepard, the author.

The big themes: "Friendship, making the right choices, and figuring out who you are," Shepard added.

Shepard, 39, a Pittsburgh resident and the mother of two young sons, was one of more than a dozen featured writers at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival on Saturday in downtown Fort Myers' Centennial Park.

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Melanie Payne
TELL MEL

Medical, water bills confound Cape Coral residents

City regulations can get complicated as these three consumer issues illustrate.

False alarm

Nearly 2,000 Cape Coral homeowners received a collection notice recently from PennCredit Corp. Hilda Avedikian, was one of them.

"Our client is serious about collecting all monies owed them and I am sure your intentions are to honor your debt," the letter read.

"My credit is impeccable," Avedikian said, so the notice was disturbing. She couldn't understand why the city, the City of Cape Coral, would bill her for "medical services" on Dec. 23, 2014, as the letter indicated. And when she called the city, no one had an explanation and suggested she call the number on the letter.

Avedikian was reluctant to do that, she said, because it could be a scammer. That's why she sent the letter to me to check out.

I didn't call the number. Instead, I called city spokeswoman Connie Barron.

Barron said when she heard about the letter she, too, thought it was a scam. But it's not.

"It's a fine for a false (security) alarm," Barron said. "Unfortunately, Penn Credit labeled it as medical services."

Barron said the city bills homeowners with security systems when there are repeated "false alarm" calls to police or fire. The city billed 1,913 of these homeowners who hadn't paid. The \$187,475 worth of bills was turned over to PennCredit Corporation for collection. Penn Credit also handles other delinquent accounts for city services, Barron said, and will get 18 percent of whatever it collects.

If you received one of these bills, don't ignore it. You can pay Penn Credit or you can pay the City of Cape Coral.

Fuzzy math

When water meters break they can

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Michael Castro, 13, tries out a trombone at the Gulf Coast Symphony's Musical Discovery Zone at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival on Saturday in Fort Myers.

AMANDA INSCORE/THE NEWS-PRESS

Tell Mel

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stop recording water usage or greatly under report how much is used. In a place like Cape Coral, where people often go away for months, that signficant drop in usage might not draw attention. But after six months or so, if there's no water used at a house you send someone out to test the meter.

When the water meter at Brooke Timm's home malfunctioned in February 2016 the problem wasn't discovered until September. Six months later, she received an extra \$350 charge tacked on to her water bill. The city estimated her water usage during the time the meter was broken and now she had 30 days to pay.

"I honestly don't have that money. My water will be shut off. I'm hoping you can help," Timm wrote in an email message.

I thought I couldn't. I get that the broken meter was the city's equipment but in my opinion (and theirs) you used the water so you should pay for it. In Timm's case however, I wondered how they came up with the \$350 figure.

I usually get along with spokeswoman Barron but we were not seeing eye-to-eye on this one. The city took the six months after the meter was fixed averaged the usage and then billed the customer for that amount, Barron explained.

I questioned why it was the six months after the meter was fixed?

To me, the most logical thing would have been to look at the usage during the same period the year before. I've found that my water usage in the summer and fall is lower than the winter and spring. So why estimate a summer-to-fall water usage using winter-to-spring months?

I called the estimate period "arbitrary," which rankled Barron a bit and I admit, I got testy. When we both calmed down and decided to look at what the policy was, it stated the estimate should be calculated using the six months prior to the meter malfunction.

Using the new formula, the amount Timm owed was \$133.29, saving her family about \$250. Moreover, the payments could be spread over a few months.

"I'm fine with that," Timm said. "It's great they figured it out for me but how many other people did this happen to?"

I think Timm took a chance getting the estimate recalculated. She turned out to

owe less but what if she owed more? I'm not sure how many homes had been wrongly calculated or if the city just made a mistake on the one home. But it might behoove them to go back, recalculate these back bills and see if they can get more money or if they owe customers refunds.

Foreclosure update

The abandoned and rundown house I wrote about last week has a buyer who intends to fix it up.

Wendy Hanko contacted me complaining about a house that was a blight on her neighborhood. I tried to contact the owner to find out what was going on but failed and the city spokeswoman Barron said that if something wasn't done, the city would demolish it.

A day after the column ran I received an email from real estate agent Jeff Easterbrook. The house is under contract to be sold, Easterbrook said. But it was used as collateral and there has been a hold up getting a clear title.

The buyer, Rebecca Neal, a partner in Savin' Havens LLC, also contacted me in response to the article, sending a copy of a letter she sent to the City of Cape Coral. Neal has been in negotiations to buy the house since November and each time she visits the home, "we are dismayed at the continued destruction and vandalism due to its unsecured access."

She asked if the city would allow Savin' Havens to board up the home before it officially owns it.

"We can't give her permission to trespass on the property," Barron said. But the city could board up the property if the owner won't do it.

Easterbrook said Neal should have just asked the owner if it was OK to secure the property.

The owner would probably be glad to have her do it, but Neal is taking a chance that the sale might not go through. She would then lose what it cost her to do the job.

The bottom line, however, is the neighbors won't have that much longer to look at this dilapidated home. The closing date is May 31, but could happen sooner, Easterbrook said. And if the sale doesn't go through, the city has no intention of letting it sit in its present state much longer.

Contact: TellMel@news-press.com; 239-344-4772; 2442 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Fort Myers, FL 33901. [facebook.com/TellMel](https://www.facebook.com/TellMel) and [@tellmel](https://twitter.com/tellmel) Sign up for the Tell Mel newsletter at news-press.com/newsletters

Reading

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The 18th annual event was organized by the Lee County Library System to promote reading and the library.

It's admission-free and included book signings, contests, meet-and-greets, author talks, readings, activities and free books for kids and teens, a teen battle of the bands and more.

The main goals "are to bring the library to people who don't normally go to the library," said festival coordinator Margie Byers.

The festival relies on volunteers and gifts. Byers said literary-themed fund-raisers in prior months paid for the estimated \$125,000 in hard costs, which didn't include in-kind donations.

Shepard's "Pretty Little Liars" inspired the ABC Family/Freeform television series of the same name, and which has begun its seventh and final season.

At her author's talk, she confessed

to not asking too much about the show's plots, so she can be just as genuinely surprised as the fans, and share her reactions through social media.

She also acknowledged a one-time gig helping for former model and TV personality Tyra Banks with a novel.

"She was very nice, with a creative. She had her idea, and didn't want to change it.

"It got a little crazy."

Fort Myers resident Siva McAteer and her daughters, Olivia, 15 and Ilise, 14, listened raptly. They'd just purchased "The Amateurs," Shepard's newest work.

Olivia McAteer said she likes Shepard's books because "there's lots of suspense."

Younger sister, Ilise, just read her first "Pretty Little Liars" novel: "I'm really into the show."

Their mother confessed to having not read any of the books nor to have seen the show.

"For me as a mom, I'm just glad they're reading - and staying out of trouble."

Connect with this reporter @Alvascribe (Twitter) and LauraPatrickRuane (Facebook).




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