



M U L T I S T A T E

[Halloween is brought to you by these Florida lobbyists and political associations](#)

The witching hour is upon us.

Maybe ghosts, ghouls and superheroes won't fill the streets this year, but the coronavirus pandemic can't take all the fun out of Halloween.

While the coronavirus pandemic never got as bad as the horror classic Dawn of the Dead, heading to the mall was a spooky proposition a few months ago. Now that masks and social distancing protocols are the norm, shoppers are starting to head back to the register.

That's good news for the Florida Retail Federation, which is expecting Halloween to do wonders for stores across the state — according to a consumer survey conducted by the National Retail Federation, Halloween spending is expected to cross the \$8 billion mark this year. While that's a significant dip from last year, it's not as bad as once feared.

When FRF needs help in the Legislature, they turn to French Brown of Dean Mead, Jon Johnson and Darrick McGee of Johnson & Blanton, and their in-house team of R. Scott Shalley, Jake Farmer, Lorena Holley and Grace Lovell.

After making the trip to Wal-Mart or Target to grab some garb for the kiddos and something sweet, there's the question of what to do with the rest of the night.

In a normal year, Halloween falling on a Saturday would mean plenty of options — parties for adults, Halloween Horror Nights for the tourist crowd and of course trick-or-treating for kids without fear of missing bedtime on a school night.

Universal Studios might be seen as a little brother to Disney for most of the year, but not in October. Unfortunately, their monthlong Halloween bash was scrubbed this year, but the Horror Nights spirit lives in in a scaled-down celebration.

The theme park has set up [a pair of haunted houses](#), one is themed after the 1935 film “The Bride of Frankenstein Lives” and the other is titled “Revenge of the Tooth Fairy” — dentophobics be warned, this one flips the tooth fairy mythos on its head.

Just as horror fans rely on Universal for scares, the tourism juggernaut relies on a talented team of lobbyists to advance its priorities in Tallahassee. The current roster: Brett Bacot, Jim Magill and Kimberly McGlynn of Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney; Will McKinley, Angela Dempsey, Fred Dickinson, Erik Kirk and Sophie Smith of PooleMcKinley; Missy Timmins of Timmins Consulting; and in-houser Melanie Becker.

As for trick-or-treating and partying ... the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention placed both on the [high-risk list](#). It’s for the greater good, of course, but it’s no less disappointing than getting a tube of toothpaste at the door. Still, there a few places for kids to safely sport their costumes.

Down in the Glades area, U.S. Sugar has teamed up with the cities of Moore Haven, LaBelle, Clewiston, Belle Glade, and Indiantown to make sure trick-or-treaters don’t go home empty-handed Saturday night. [The events](#) range from drive-in candy pickups to socially distanced, mask required haunted houses.

U.S. Sugar’s is among Florida’s biggest businesses and, accordingly, they have many of the big-name lobbyists at the biggest firms on retainer.

The list includes Brian Ballard and Chris Dorworth of Ballard Partners; Gregory Black of Waypoint Strategies; Carlos Cruz of Converge Government Affairs; Charlie Dudley and Cory Guzzo of Floridian Partners; Mercer Fearington, Seth McKeel, Sydney Ridley and Clark Smith of The Southern Group; Richard Heffley and Kelly Horton of Heffley & Associates; Frank Mayernick and Tracy Mayernick of The Mayernick Group; Kirk Pepper of GrayRobinson; Christopher Smith of Tripp Scott PA; and Screven Watson of Screven Watson & Associates.

With few knocks at the door and limited party options, many of us will be flipping through channels — or, more likely, streaming services — looking for a festive film.

Sunshine State cinema savants can pocket this piece of trivia: [Creature from the Black Lagoon](#) was shot in Florida — more specifically, Silver Springs, Wakulla Springs and Jax. The definitive “[deep ones](#)” film went on to be considered a classic, but there’s been few other “Fresh from Florida films” to be so honored in the 65 years since it bowed.

If [Film Florida](#) gets its way, that could change. The trade association has been fighting for years to lure film productions back to Florida, most recently through an innovative grant model. It

hasn't squeaked through the Legislature yet, but the proposal has definitely gained traction among influential lawmakers such as Sen. Joe Gruters.

The renewed interest is thanks in part to the lobbying efforts of Al Cardenas, Slater Bayliss, Chris Chaney, Stephen Shiver and Sarah Busk Suskey of The Advocacy Group at Cardenas Partners.

Of course, not everyone is into creature features. For those that want a little Sci-Fi mixed in, all-time greats such as It Came from Outer Space, Alien and The Thing are always good picks for a reliable fright. Space travel is in vogue right now, and the premier name in the business is shooting rockets from the Space Coast to the stars.

Elon Musk's [SpaceX](#) (or "Space Exploration Technologies" for the long winded) brought joy to people the world over early on in the pandemic when it [launched a Falcon](#) into orbit from Kennedy Space Center. That rocket carried two astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA.

While the mission was a success, SpaceX's team of rocket scientists know their limits. That's why the company turns to Jeff Sharkey and Taylor Biehl of [Capital Alliance Group](#) to bring its priorities in for a safe landing at the Capitol.

Back on terra firma, there's another tech revolution in its nascent phase: Self-driving cars. And unlike the nightmare-inducing [Maximum Overdrive](#), the new-fangled innovation is apparently safe enough for Sen. Jeff Brandes to [hop in the non-driver seat](#).

Musk's Tesla Motors is one of the companies making waves in autonomous vehicles, but there's a truckload more looking to boost their presence in Florida, [Starsky Robotics](#) and Google (via [Waymo](#)) among them. But until the programming geniuses behind AVs find a way to automate the Legislature, they'll be in need of some backup in Tallahassee.

For Starsky, those duties have been farmed out to Cesar Fernandez, Jonathan Kilman, Paul Lowell and Brad Nail of Converge Government Affairs while Waymo has Rhett O'Doski, Sara Clements, Ryder Rudd and Sean Stafford of McGuireWoods Consulting in the driver's seat.

[Two men tied to Householder corruption probe plead guilty](#)

Two men charged alongside former GOP House Speaker Larry Householder in an alleged racketeering operation channeled through the Ohio Statehouse pleaded guilty to one felony federal charge each Thursday afternoon.

The pleas mark the first known convictions in the Householder affair and an early victory for prosecutors. They also raise the possibility of the men testifying against remaining defendants in exchange for a more lenient sentencing.

Both FirstEnergy lobbyist Juan Cespedes, 41, and Householder's longtime political strategist, Jeff Longstreth, 44, pleaded guilty in a video conferenced hearing in U.S. District Court in the Southern District of Ohio. They face up to 20 years in prison and up to \$250,000 in fines.

U.S. District Judge Timothy Black indicated he would hold off on sentencing the two until the cases against other alleged conspirators are resolved.

Cespedes and Longstreth originally pleaded not guilty this summer after federal prosecutors accused them of working within a \$61 million operation to take money from an unnamed company believed to be FirstEnergy Corp. They then used the funds to ensure the passage of legislation to bail out two nuclear plants formerly owned by a company affiliate, now known as Energy Harbor.

Members of the "enterprise," as prosecutors referred to it, are said to have enriched themselves personally and politically, and used the funds, through different middleman entities, to help elect a slate of candidates perceived as likelier to support the legislation. Prosecutors estimate the bailout to be worth as much as \$1.6 billion for FirstEnergy.

They also allegedly used the money to thwart a ballot referendum seeking to reverse the legislation, which tacks fees on energy ratepayers and businesses to fund the bailout. It also guts clean energy standards, subsidizes coal and solar plants around the state, and more.

Longstreth, according to facts set forth in the plea deal, organized Generation Now, a dark money group used as a pass-through for FirstEnergy funds, at Householder's behest to benefit him and the enterprise.

His attorney did not return a request for comment.

Cespedes, per facts set forth in his plea deal, orchestrated payments from FirstEnergy to Generation Now, "in return for specific official action by Householder."

Cespedes' attorneys, Kaitlyn Stephens and Mark Collins, released a statement claiming their client pleaded guilty because after reviewing the prosecution's evidence, "he realized he aided in

the Householder conspiracy that was longstanding in existence two years prior” to his involvement.

They declined further comment.

Charging documents show federal prosecutors believe FirstEnergy began bankrolling Householder’s enterprise in March 2017.

Lobbying records show Cespedes registered as a lobbyist for FirstEnergy Solutions in May 2018. He registered to lobby for Energy Harbor in March 2020.

The plea agreements do not expressly indicate that either Cespedes or Longstreth will act as government witnesses. However, according to Case Western Reserve University law professor Michael Benza, this is typical in prosecutions that are still underway.

He said prosecutors are likely hoping the two can provide information to secure convictions of a bigger fish like Householder.

“Typically, the government starts wherever they get their entrance into an organization,” he said. “They start as low as they can and try to rise up the hierarchy.”

Entities like Generation Now, known as 501c(4) “social welfare” organizations, can be used to obfuscate the origins of political spending as they are not required to disclose their donors.

Along with Householder, Longstreth and Cespedes, contract lobbyists Neil Clark and Matt Borges were charged in the scandal as well. Clark, Borges and Householder have all pleaded not guilty.

U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio David DeVillers suggested in July that more charges could come from the investigation. In a statement Thursday, he said the investigation remains ongoing and declined further comment.

FirstEnergy has not been charged with any crime. However, Cespedes’ conviction inches the prosecution closer to FirstEnergy. The company, through a spokeswoman, declined to comment.

The company fired its CEO Charles Jones and two other executives Thursday, according to a news release issued after the hearings. It did so after an internal review “related to the

government investigations” found the executives violated “certain FirstEnergy policies and its code of conduct.”

The guilty pleas were submitted five days before an election. The man at the center of the conspiracy, Householder, is up for reelection in Perry County. While he was dethroned as speaker, House Republicans, who control the chamber, voted against expelling him from his seat.

Householder’s attorneys did not respond to inquiries.

Legislation has been introduced to repeal House Bill 6, the bailout legislation, though it has yet to come up for a committee or floor vote, despite tremendous pressure since Householder’s July arrest.

Meanwhile, lawsuits have poured in against FirstEnergy relating to the scandal from Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, two of Ohio’s largest cities, and company investors.

Rep. Dave Leland, D-Columbus, said in a statement the plea deals show the General Assembly must repeal HB 6.

“Today’s plea deals affirmed what was already widely accepted to be true — that a crime was committed in the passage of HB 6,” he said. “But it’s little comfort to Ohioans to hear about criminal convictions while the product of those crimes, legislation taking over \$1 billion out of their pockets and giving it to energy corporations, is still law today because of Republican leadership.”