

JULY 3

Independence Day celebrations continue today with fireworks displays at Sun 'N Lake in Highlands County and at Frostproof in Polk County.

Sun 'N Lake's festivities will begin at 7:00 this evening and will feature the grand opening of the community's new playground. There also will be food trucks, a touch-a-truck contest with Highlands County Fire Rescue - as well as a number of booths, exhibits and displays.

Admission will be free beginning at 8:45 tonight.

Frostproof will have their "Lights on the Lake" celebration this evening from 6-10pm. They also will have food trucks and street vendors - with the pyrotechnics to be fired off from a barge over Lake Clinch.

Celebrations will continue tomorrow with fireworks in Lake Placid, Sebring and a Firecracker Festival in Avon Park.

Things got started Saturday in Hardee County, with their annual "Red, White and Boom" celebration.

Highlands County sheriff's detectives are working this morning to unravel an overnight fatal shooting incident. Reportedly, it occurred sometime before 9:30 last night at a Snapper Drive address north of Sebring.

A 27-year-old Sebring man was shot and taken to the hospital, where he expired. Reportedly, sheriff's officials have a suspect in the case.

No names or other details are yet available.

One Frostproof resident was killed and another injured yesterday afternoon in a single-car crash near the Sun Ray community.

Polk County sheriff's officials say 46-year-old Robert Castillo was driving a Nissan southbound, when he lost control of his vehicle near Sun Ray. The car crossed both lanes of traffic, over an embankment and overturned several times - then caught fire.

A passenger in the car, 42-year-old Donnie Joe Lee of Frostproof was ejected. He was airlifted out. Castillo was pronounced dead at the scene.

Highway 27 was closed in the area for several hours.

## JULY 4

Be advised, it's going to be another scorcher today. The National Weather Service in Tampa has issued a Heat advisory. It'll be in effect from 11am until 7:00 tonight.

Feels like temperatures could be as hot as 110-degrees in the area. That includes a dozen counties including Highlands, Hardee, Desoto and Polk.

Today is July 4th - Independence Day and Avon Park will be celebrating in a big way. The City of Charm will host their inaugural Firecracker Festival starting at noon in Dondalson Park. In addition to food trucks and a number of booths and displays, there will be a pie eating contest, a donut eating contest, sack races and horseshoe tossing competition.

There will also be live music all day long as well as Miss Firecracker pageants in five different age categories.

The fireworks are set to go off over Lake Verona beginning at about 9pm.

As part of the festivities, the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce will conduct a collection of non-perishable foodstuffs for the Heartland Food Bank, who says their shelves are running low.

There also will be a fireworks display in Lake Placid - that one is sponsored by the Jaycees and will be set off over Lake June.

In Sebring the pyrotechnics will go off over Lake Jackson. During the day, the Highlands Lakeside Theatre will present their annual Patriotic Revue. The show is free, but there will be a barbecue to benefit their scholarship fund. Shows will be on the hour every hour from 11am to 3pm.

Local officials are warning citizens who plan to celebrate Independence Day with their own personal fireworks to celebrate safely. They urge residents to have a hose, a bucket of water, or a fire extinguisher nearby in case things go wrong.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd is warning people not to fire their guns in the air - or anywhere else. Judd says it's not unheard of to have a stray bullet land more than a mile away.

Firing weapons in such a manner is - illegal.

Fire rescue units from West Sebring and Desoto City, along with Florida Forest Service crews were called out late yesterday afternoon to quell a brush fire off Stream Avenue in Sebring.

Officials believe it was caused by a lightning strike. They got a bit of help from afternoon rains in extinguishing the flames.

The blaze charred about 1/4 to 1/2 acre before they got it out. Firefighters reportedly had it contained in about 20 minutes.

No structures were damaged, no injuries were reported in the incident.

JULY 5

Local celebrations of the nation's birthday came to a close last night, with successful fireworks displays in Avon Park, Sebring and Lake Placid. Local law enforcement officials say there have been no reports of people losing fingers or other body parts in firing off private pyrotechnics.

The inaugural Firecracker Festival was staged in Avon Park yesterday by Heartland Helping Hands and the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce. Officials say that everything went off well there - despite some blistering afternoon temperatures and an afternoon thunderstorm.

There was some damage from that weather in Avon Lakes, with reports of hail, trees losing limbs and straight-line winds of as much as 60-mph.

Some big doings are in store today for the Sebring Chamber of Commerce. They have consolidated their two locations on Highway 27 and in Sebring proper, and will be opening their new location officially today at the Circle Theatre.

The event will mark the Greater Sebring Chamber of Commerce 100th year celebration. Chamber members will be feted with live music and light refreshments as part of the event.

Staff from the office of Florida Senator Marco Rubio will be in Avon Park today to hear concerns of his constituents. They'll be there from 10am until noon. Some folks already have made appointments, but in the between time, staff members reportedly will talk with residents on a first-come, first served basis.

That session will be held at the Avon Park Library on Museum Avenue.

JULY 6

The National Weather Service has issued an excessive heat advisory for the area through the remainder of the week.

Highlands County will remain under the advisory until 7:00 tonight. The combination of hot afternoon temperatures and increasing humidity will result in heat index values of as much as 108 degrees.

Afternoon temperatures will remain above normal, with humidity remaining high through the balance of the week.

Residents are reminded to protect themselves. Stay hydrated, limit outdoor activities and seek shelter if afternoon thunderstorms threaten.

The Greater Sebring Chamber of Commerce officially moved into their new location yesterday. The consolidated offices now are at the newly refurbished Circle Theatre on the historic circle in downtown Sebring.

Dozens of chamber members turned out to take tours of the new facility.

The Grand Opening is the kick-off to the chamber's 100th anniversary. The facility now will double as executive offices and an entertainment venue for the chamber.

The Hardee County commission will get together today in Wauchula. Among other items on their agenda will be setting a tentative fire assessment and solid waste assessment for residents for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year.

In other action, commissioners are expected to approve a pair of subdivisions and will establish objectives for the composition of the Hardee County Industrial Development Authority.

JULY 7

The National Weather Service has issued another excessive heat advisory for the area today.

Highlands County is under the advisory until 7:00 tonight. The combination of hot afternoon temperatures and increasing humidity will result in heat index values well over 100 degrees.

Afternoon temperatures will remain above normal, with humidity remaining high through the balance of the week.

Residents are reminded to protect themselves. Stay hydrated, limit outdoor activities and seek shelter if afternoon thunderstorms threaten.

After being tossed from their Avon Park airport location, officials of NASGRASS say they have constructed a lawn mower racing track at the Florida Flywheeler's Park off the Avon Park Cutoff Road near Fort Meade.

This weekend, volunteers will be hanging lights, finishing up painting, moving clay around, and installing the flagpole among other things. Reportedly, a number of mowers may be taking some test laps to see how the new facility runs.

Their plans are to have a soft opening in September with the racing season to start in October.

Sebring High School's Firemen's Field is up for voting in a Florida High School Sports News poll, conducted by SB Live 'Best Friday Night Vibe' survey. The Blue Streak's stadium is one of a dozen stadiums in the Sunshine State that are in Round Two of the website's poll.

Others include Niceville, Miami, Zephyrhills, Lakeland, Deland, Venice and Key West.

Participants can vote as many times as they like between now and September 15.

The site is located at <https://news.scorebooklive.com/florida/2023/07/06/vote-now-which-stadium-has-the-best-friday-night-high-school-football-vibe-in-the-state-heading-into-2023?fbclid=IwAR0BZluxWW5ML-o8UKGhtBCb23R71eimRJQRpbs78ErYJOtN4Mb5W2njoCc>

Polk County Sheriff's detectives have charged a Lakeland couple with aggravated manslaughter of a child, after their 18-month-old toddler died.

Joel and Jazmine Rondon, both 33 years old, reportedly left the child in a car overnight following a night of partying. Officials say the child died while strapped into her car seat in the extreme heat the next day.

Apparently, they took their six-year-old and eight-year-old to bed, but they left their 18-month-old in the car.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd says the parents tested positive for alcohol and drugs, including methamphetamine.

An Arcadia man faces drug counts after a traffic stop near Zolfo Springs. Hardee County Sheriff's officials say Martell Johnny Hughes was arrested after the car he was riding in failed to observe the "Move Over" law.

After a backpack with crack cocaine was found in the vehicle. Hughes was arrested for trafficking cocaine, possession of cocaine with intent to sell, and possession of drug paraphernalia. The driver, James Travis Scott also of Arcadia, was also arrested for driving with a suspended driver's license.

JULY 10

According to reports, Sebring is suffering a problem with the homeless. Apparently, tourists have said they have been accosted in the pier beach area near the Highlands Lakeside Theater - and will never return.

One merchant in the downtown area recounted a story of a homeless man defecating on the street near his shop on Ridgewood Drive and exposing himself.

City and county officials are calling for a workshop to discuss how to deal with the issue.

Avon Park city council members will get a clarification from city attorney Gerald Buhr, on an ordinance when they meet in regular session this evening. The measure regards the authority of the mayor to issue or reject certain proclamations or one-time recognition periods.

In other action, the council will consider municipal purchasing policies for community development block grant funds.

Frostproof city council members will get together this evening for a workshop session. At issue in the Friendly City will be a budget discussion for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year.

Frostproof Finance Director Winnie Gordon will present the city's estimated revenue and projected expenses for council's consideration.

JULY 11

Training continues at the Avon Park Air Force Range today. Officials there say they will be hosting various sorties until very late tonight. The noise levels will continue to be high.



No word as to who is doing the testing of the facility, which continues to increase in use.

Tonight at 6:00, District 2 County Commissioner Don Elwell will host his regular town hall meeting for residents. That will be in the University Center at South Florida State College.

At issue there will be more focus on the county budget as well as other county issues. There will be pizza served before the session. That will commence at 5:30.

Earlier this morning, Highlands County commissioners met to discuss the budget for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year. They mulled over requests by county department heads and looked at the capital financial strategy for future building programs.

The School Board of Highlands County will meet in regular session this evening. They will be looking at several contractual agreements - including a pact with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office to provide School Resource Deputies to the system.

In other action, the board will look at several issues regarding the Student Code of Conduct for the upcoming school year.

There were some tense moments in Lake Wales yesterday when a motorist hit a power pole. The mishap occurred at S.R. 60 near Deland Ave.

According to reports, the driver was stuck inside the vehicle for a time while power lines were removed from atop the car.

To complicate matters, a small grass fire started in some nearby vegetation.

Lakeland city officials want to hear what residents think of plans for downtown. They will be hosting a public forum today for the Downtown West Action Plan. The five-year plan calls for improvements to infrastructure, housing and economic development.

The meeting takes place from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at the RP Funding Center in the Lake Hollingsworth Room in Lakeland.

JULY 12

There was some discussion at the Highlands County School board meeting last night about school resource officers and how much the board pays for them. Resident Jesse Sapp said his reading of the contract shows that there are 17 Highlands County Sheriff's deputies filling those slots at \$60,000 apiece. However, there are three officers from the Sebring Police Department that cost the schools some \$93,000 each.

Sapp suggested that simply going with deputies could save the system around \$100,000 a year.

School staff said in actuality the difference is only about \$7,000 per officer. Board members approved the contract without further discussion.

Avon Park's mayor has a bit more ceremonial power. The council approved the second reading of a measure that gives the mayor the authority to issue or reject proclamations or one-time recognition periods.

City attorney Gerald Buhr noted that council members still could bring such matters before the board if they were so inclined. Nevertheless, the vote was not unanimous. Councilwoman Bernice Taylor cast a no vote on the ordinance.

Lakeland Police officers who punched a man during an arrest won't face charges. Tenth Judicial Circuit State Attorney Brian Haas recently informed Lakeland Police he won't pursue charges against the four officers.

Video from December shows the officers punching Antwan Glover. Haas says Glover put one officer in a headlock and presented an ongoing and escalating threat. Haas adds officers had good reason to suspect Glover was armed.

JULY 17

A Highlands County commissioner has received a prestigious award. District 4 Commissioner Arlene Tuck was presented with the Florida Association of Counties' "Presidential Advocacy Award" at the FAC Annual conference.

During the conference, Tuck was re-appointed to a number of committees, including; the Finance & Audit Committee, the Agriculture & Rural Affairs Committee, the Community & Urban Affairs Policy Committee, and the Finance, Tax, & Administration Committee.

She is also a member of the Small County Coalition.

Frostproof city council members are set to approve the fire assessment for the upcoming fiscal year when they meet in regular session this evening. Residents in the Friendly City will pay \$167 annually for a single family home.

In other action, the council will move to regulate food trucks, setting rules for mobile food dispensing vehicles. They also will look at changing five acres of property in town from Agricultural to low density residential zoning to allow for a planned unit development.

Looking for an affordable place to live in Florida? A study by Smart Asset ranks Hardee County eighth in the Top 10 most affordable in the Sunshine State. The median home value there was set at just over \$200,000 with a Median income of just over \$41,000.

The survey compiled data from the Census Bureau, real estate site Zillow and the U.S. Internal Revenue Service in making the list.

Two Polk County residents were killed and two other injured in a weekend traffic crash in Hardee County. Florida Highway Patrol officials say two Mulberry youngsters died when the Hyundai SUV they were riding in went off State Road 62 and slammed into a concrete power pole.

The driver, a 43-year-old Winter Haven man, and a 34-year-old Mulberry woman were seriously injured. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the roadway was wet at the time of the crash.

JULY 18

Highlands County commissioners today approved a raise in the garbage collection fees for county residents. It will jump from \$216 to \$222 annually. The increase will bring in more than a quarter million dollars. About half the increase will go to the hauler, with the rest to go to the county.

Commissioner Scott Kirouac called for a study to determine whether the tipping fees at the landfill should be raised due to increased costs there.

The commission also put off a public hearing slated to raise the fire assessment in the county to the second week in August. Apparently, there are questions about increases on some assessment categories.

There was a shooting, west of Sebring last night. According to reports, one juvenile was shot and another was injured in a confrontation in the Crossings near the Fish Streets.

Both the victims are expected to survive. There's no indication what the altercation was about.

The Florida Teacher of the Year Roundtable opened this week in Orlando. It could mean big accolades for one local educator. Memorial Elementary School 5th Grade Math & Science Teacher Kayla Jackson is one of five finalists for Florida Teacher of the Year honors.

Jackson already has been tapped as Highlands County Teacher of the Year and has been recognized as a high impact teacher for several years.

If selected, she would be the first from Highlands County to be selected as a statewide winner.

The convention began yesterday in Orlando.

JULY 20

The search for Domonique Rakeem Graham is over. He was reportedly apprehended in Orange County yesterday by agents of the Florida Department of

Law Enforcement. The 30-year-old Graham was being sought in connection with a shooting incident on Sturgeon Avenue west of Sebring Monday night.

One youngster inside the vehicle was hit by a bullet and a second injured by debris after Graham allegedly opened fire on a truck during a domestic dispute.

He is facing counts of attempted second-degree murder, aggravated battery, shooting into an occupied conveyance, and child neglect. Reportedly, Graham has not yet been returned to Highlands County.

They're doing crack repair out at the Sebring International Raceway. Apparently, a four million dollar machine was brought in to do the mending on the historic 3.74 mile circuit. Track officials say they hope the work will bring another five years of life to the fissures in the raceway.

Work is scheduled to wind up today, just in time for the Sports Car Club of America's "Summer Heat Track Event" and the US Drift Circuit's "Fun in the Sun" activities both slated for this weekend.

More work is scheduled on Phase Four of the Sebring Parkway, aided by another infusion of tax dollars. At their meeting this week, Highlands County Commissioners approved the acceptance of some \$1.1 million in federal monies.

That cash comes as part of a Housing & Urban Development Economic Development Initiative Grant Agreement. The money will help in the planning, design, and required National Environmental Policy Act clearance and approvals for the roadway.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials have a capture to report. They found fugitive Aaron Matthew Fuston hiding in the back yard of a home in the Wauchula Hills subdivision

Fuston has warrants for: Attempted second Degree Murder, Possession of a Firearm by Convicted Felon, Aggravated Assault with a Deadly Weapon, and Firing a Weapon in Public. He was taken into custody without incident.

The homeowner said they had been unaware of the activities, and woke up to an army of officers in their yard.

A Polk County man will spend decades behind bars for what prosecutors call a senseless tragedy. Winter Haven's Jorge Britton was sentenced yesterday to 40 years for a crash that killed two Pinellas County men two years ago on I-4.

Investigators found he was going over 150 miles an hour when he rear-ended the car the victims were in. The 36-year-old was convicted on charges that include vehicular homicide and DUI manslaughter. The State Attorney's Office says this lengthy prison sentence should serve as a warning to anyone who makes the reckless decision to drink and drive.

JULY 21

Highlands County Teacher of the Year Kayla Jackson was up for statewide honors at the Florida Department of Education convention in Orlando last night, but lost out to Addriana Sweringen of Bay County for the top honors. In all, there were five finalists in the statewide competition.

Jackson was the first educator from Highlands to make the finals. A fifth grade math and science teacher from Memorial Elementary School, Jackson had been tapped as a high impact teacher for several years.

Highway 70 in Highlands County has been shut down twice in the past two days due to accidents. The road was closed just before noon yesterday because of a mishap on 70 just east of the Highway 27 intersection.

Early this morning, a collision between a semi-tractor trailer rig and a truck near the Okeechobee County line shut the highway down again.

No injuries were reported in either accident.

Over a dozen people are suing for what their lawyer calls a catastrophic train derailment in Polk County. Fourteen plaintiffs filed suit yesterday against three trucking companies and a driver for last week's crash in Lakeland. A semi-truck transporting cars from the three companies got stuck on the tracks on Canal Ave North and was hit by an Amtrak train.

The plaintiffs claim the semi-truck driver was not fit to operate a commercial motor vehicle, and the three companies named in the suit should have known he would be negligent. Morgan and Morgan is representing the plaintiffs, and lawyers say the driver's negligence injured dozens of people, disrupted train service for thousands of customers and caused massive delays.

JULY 24

There will be a triple header for the Avon Park city council this evening. At 4:00, they'll get together for a special budget session. At issue there will be expenditures for the airport, sanitation services as well as the water & sewer funds.

At 5:30 the council convenes as the Avon Park Community Redevelopment Agency, where they will review the grant demolition program and review a number of requests.



The regular session then will be held at 6pm. A discussion on the city's fire assessment and mandates for lakefront properties to connect to the municipal sewer system are on the agenda.

In other action, the council will hear a report on the Boys & Girls Club from interim Executive Director Janice Rearick, and consider a policy for protection of those involved in non-violent civil rights demonstrations.

Alcohol is suspected in a deadly crash in Polk County. It happened yesterday morning on SR 400. FHP says Lakeland's Quarpaesha Prather was drunk when she rear-ended a car. The 36-year-old Winter Haven woman driving that car was ejected and killed. Her 44-year-old male passenger from Mulberry suffered minor injuries. The 31-year-old Prather was not hurt, but she was arrested for DUI manslaughter.

JULY 25

A gruesome discovery this morning in Leisure Lakes. Highlands County Sheriff's deputies are investigating the circumstances around the head of a calf, left atop a set of mailboxes at the end of Country Lane.

So far, there's no indication as to who left the remains of the young beef cow, or where the rest of it might be.

Avon Park city council members met last night and started work on setting new fire assessment rates for the City of Charm. Consultants from Stantec presented the proposal.

Under the new schedule residential rates would remain at \$140 annually. However, commercial, institutional and non-profit charges could increase. Consultants also recommended adding a "vacant property" category and suggested removing a current cap on dwelling units.

The council will hold a September public hearing before taking final action.

First it was the hot weather, now notices are going out to beware of mosquitoes. Local residents are being warned that the insects again are in abundance. They're being asked to help reduce the bug population.

The Highlands County Health Department reportedly has a limited supply of "mosquito dunks" available at its George Blvd location south of Sebring. The discs are designed to be tossed into standing water prevent mosquitoes from breeding.

Meanwhile, residents are cautioned to wear shoes, socks, long pants, and long sleeves - especially during the evening hours.

Apply mosquito repellent to clothing and avoid spraying it directly on bare skin. Additionally, mosquito netting may be helpful in protecting young children.

An argument outside of a Frostproof restaurant has resulted in a trip to jail for a Bradenton man. According to reports, the 35-year-old was having a heated argument in the car outside the eatery, and when an employee came out to do a wellness check, the man allegedly reached inside his glove box to -quote - "pull his nine."

As he attempted to drive away, deputies arrived and conducted a traffic stop. When asked for his ID, the man told the officer he "didn't have to."

He did.

Luis Alejandrino-Diaz was arrested as a Habitual Traffic Offender for driving while license is suspended or revoked, and resisting. He was taken to the Polk County jail.

JULY 26

While county health officials continue to warn residents about the plethora of mosquitos this year, Avon Park officials say they won't be doing any spraying in the City of Charm.

Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader told the council that in order to apply the spray, staff members would have to go through a licensure program. Even so, workers indicated they were uneasy about the job.

Schrader said his research found that spraying is expensive and provides minimal results, with an equal amount of praise and complaints from citizens.

Instead, Schrader recommended that residents take measures to eliminate breeding grounds and protect themselves against the biting insects.

Highlands County teachers will be back in the classroom next week, getting ready for the 2023-24 academic year. Highlands County Schools Director of Human Resources Carla Ball told school board members there still are 76 vacant spots in the educational roster.

Ball says that's about half the vacancies announced at the end of the last school year. She also told the board there were a half dozen more teachers in the system and 20 long term sobs have been hired to fill the gap.

Another local recruiting event for educators will be held August 6th.

JULY 27

Avon Park Mayor Garrett Anderson continues to work on sculpting the City of Charm. He has called for a joint session between the Community Redevelopment Agency and the CRA Advisory Board to create a "grand vision" for Donaldson Park.

At issue will be objectives for the city-owned facility, with a special look at the shuffleboard courts located there.

No date for such a workshop was set - a meeting date is expected to be scheduled at the next council session. The city council also sits as the city's CRA board.

The Highlands County School Board again has heard from parent Jesse Sapp. He came before the board to again warn them about Chromebook computers issued to students, and the youngsters' ability to circumvent security measures and get to YouTube and other locations where they can find content he described as "foul."

Deputy Superintendent Andrew Lethbridge told the board that despite the regular breeches - their information technology department is constantly working to lock down the system - calling it "a constant battle."

Board chair Donna Howerton noted that Sapp is the only parent who comes forward to complain about such things. Sapp is a regular at the meetings, questioning the board about various topics.

There were no injuries reported in a fire last night west of Sebring. The blaze broke out in a trailer at the Francis Mobile Home Park about 9:30.

No injuries were reported in the incident. Cause of the fire and the extent of damage has not been released.

A Polk County home is being searched to help find a missing person. Auburndale Police and the FDLE searched a home on Indiana Court yesterday. They're looking for clues in the disappearance of Tonya Whipp.

She lived in the home with the current resident, Jake Rudy, about a decade ago, but Rudy says he hasn't seen her in over a month. Police will be back at the home

today. Rudy tells WFLA he loves Whipp with all his heart, and he hopes she's found safe.

JULY 28

The 32nd Annual Caladium Festival got underway today in Lake Placid. Over the past three decades, the event has grown into one of the largest in Highlands County.

Some 150 booths, exhibits and displays from arts & crafts and other vendors are drawing tourists from all over. Today also marks the inaugural Little Miss Caladium Pageant.

The 26th Annual Caladium Festival Car & Bike Show will be held tomorrow. Dozens of classic, custom and vintage cars, trucks, vans and motorcycles will be parked in Devane Park.

The Highlands Radio Group radio stations will be broadcasting live from the event both days.

It looks like The City of Charm is looking to do something about the homeless problem. Avon Park City Councilwoman Bernice Taylor brought up the issue at the council meeting, asking what the city was going to do about it. Local members of the clergy already have indicated they would be willing to attend a workshop, and Highlands County officials have spoken with Sebring representatives about addressing the issue as well.

Avon Park Mayor Garrett Anderson says he's received "a ton of complaints," especially about an assortment of vagrants, hobos and others camping out around the historic gazebo on Main Street.

So far, no meeting date has been set.

More questions have been raised about the Highlands County Student Code of Conduct for the upcoming academic year. Board Chair Donna Howerton said she was asked whether or not students would be permitted to wear pajama pants to class.

That was a question neither she, the board, nor Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore was able to answer. Howerton opined that the issue might be taken care of at the individual schools.

She also noted that she has been approached about problems with respect for teachers in the system by school students. Apparently, there are issues with enough space in their remedial facilities.

Over the last year, dozens of new surveillance cameras reportedly have been installed throughout Polk County.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office apparently is paying for them, but not talking much about it.

They're called "Flock Safety Cameras." They are "license plate reading cameras which provide 24/7 monitoring for every home, business, and neighborhood."

The solar-powered cameras capture images of license plates and are then run through a national database, which then can alert law enforcement officials.

Among other things, they register a vehicle's make, type and color, the license plate - and notes missing or covered plates, as well as the state of the license plate.

The cameras also can spot unique features such as roof racks, bumper stickers and window stickers.

The intended use of these surveillance cameras remains unclear.

JULY 31

If you're looking for an electrician locally, it may be a while. A new study by Construction Coverage shows that the Sebring/Avon Park metro area is in the bottom 10 when it comes to the concentration of the skilled construction workers.

Highlands County has roughly one electrician for each 1,000 households here. That compares to nearly five per thousand nationally. More than 350 metro areas were ranked for the survey which used data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau to determine the rankings.

Today is the last day of July, and educators now are looking forward to the first day of school for the 2023-24 academic year. Teachers are headed back into the classrooms today to get things in readiness for the commencement of school - that will be August 10th.

This year, the first day of school will be on a Thursday.

Teacher orientation was held last week, with some 100 educators in attendance. At last report, there still are dozens of vacancies in the classrooms, with many being filled by long term substitute teachers.

A couple Desoto County residents were injured over the weekend in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a car driven by a 41-year-old Arcadia man failed to negotiate a curve on County Road 663. The vehicle went off the road and overturned.

He was critically injured and his 30-year-old female passenger was seriously injured. Both reportedly were buckled up at the time of the crash.

One person was injured in a Polk County shooting. It happened yesterday in Winter Haven at a Dollar General on Highway 17.

Police say an ex-boyfriend and a new boyfriend were arguing when at least one shot was fired. The new boyfriend was hurt and arrested for an outstanding warrant. The ex-boyfriend was also arrested.

## AUGUST 1

The action continues again today at the Avon Park Air Force Range as jets will continue training today until very late tonight. Officials at the range say noise levels will be noticeable.

They again did not say what units are running sorties over the facility

Highlands County commissioners this morning voted to set the tentative mileage rate of 8.1 - or \$8.10 for each \$1,000 of taxable valuation on homes, businesses and other properties.

Commissioner Don Elwell suggested a plan that could bring the mileage rate down to 7.7. The money would come from the projected budget savings, with some of the money for a malate cut, and the remainder to go recreation and several other programs.

The commission still could take action before final mileage ratification, which will come August 15.



While the state of Florida continues to grow in population, not all areas are experiencing a boom. In fact, some places are shrinking. Numbers now show that Hardee County is one of the top 10 counties in the Sunshine state which actually is losing population.

From 2010 to 2020, Hardee County reportedly experienced an 8.7% population decline, from a population of about 27,731 to 25,313.

Lately, officials say they have recouped a bit. Over the past two years from they have recovered about 1.3% of that loss. It's still ranked as second in the state for population loss. Gulf County was ranked as number one.

## AUGUST 3

Today is the first day on the job for new South Florida State College President Fred Hawkins. Hawkins formerly was a Representative in the Florida House for Osceola and Orange County.

During his term in office, Hawkins served as the Vice Chair of the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee as well as the whip of all education committees. He also was the president of the Osceola County Education Foundation.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials are looking for some help in solving some still outstanding cases. They have listed details of nearly two dozen unsolved incidents ranging from the disappearance of Bonnie Jo Johnson Roberts this past January to a 1979 trailer fire near Venus where the charred remains of William Luther Hinote were discovered.

Those wanting to read the details of the unsolved cases can find them on the Highlands County Sheriff's Office website. Anyone with details are asked to call the Cold Case Unit at the sheriff's office.

Highlands County has a new County Extension Director. In addition, Kati Lawson also will serve as the new 4-H Youth Development director for the county.

Lawson is a PhD from the University of Florida with 14 years of education experience as well as designing and implementing learning programs.

Sebring city council members have approved a measure to deal with the influx of homeless into the City on the Circle. They approved on first reading an ordinance that prohibits any camping on public property without prior approval from council.

The measure encompasses everything from those sleeping on park benches to Recreational Vehicles in municipally-owned lots. Those in violation will be given trespass notices.

The second and final reading of the measure is set for August 15.

#### AUGUST 4

Another sports tournament is coming to Highlands County. Without comment, Highlands County commissioners approved a proposal from consultants Airstream Ventures to bring the United States Fastpitch Softball Association here. The USFA will host the Sebring Invitational & Pumpkin Smash Tournaments.

The three year run would include up to \$20,000 in tourist tax money to underwrite the effort this year, up to \$15,000 next year and as much as \$10,000 for a 2025 event.

Sebring city council members put a proposed agreement from the Truist Bank on hold at their meeting. The suggestion was that the city would take over the maintenance and upkeep of the SunTrust Memorial on Highway 27. The park is dedicated to the memory of the five SunTrust tellers who were slain as part of a 2019 incident at the main branch.

Council members balked at the idea of taking the responsibility "in perpetuity," and sent proposed changes back to Truist for their consideration.

## AUGUST 7

A man wanted in connection with a fatal Highlands County shooting earlier this year has been nabbed in Gulfport, Mississippi. Highlands County Sheriff's officials say Shavarte Makel Deloach was wanted for the February premeditated shooting death of 57-year-old Arthur Scurry jr.

This past February 5th, Sheriff's deputies were called to a Highway Park address south of Lake Placid where they found Scurry dead of multiple gunshot wounds.

So far, there are no details on how Gulfport officials located Deloach.

Highlands County sheriff's investigators still are looking for details on the person or persons who opened fire in a crowd during a party in Leisure Lakes over the weekend. As many as 100 - 150 people were gathered in a wooded area - known as a party spot - when somebody started pulling the trigger.

A 19-year-old Sebring girl and a 16-year-old Okeechobee boy were hit. Both were airlifted to a trauma center and at last report were listed in "stable condition."

Two fatal shootings are under investigation in Lake Wales. Both occurred at the Lake Wales Housing Authority's Grove Manor Complex. Officers first were called to a North First Street address where they found 23-year-old Rhasaan Marquese Johnson who had been shot. He was transported to AdventHealth Lake Wales where he was pronounced dead.

As police descended on Martin Luther King Jr Blvd in search of a person of interest identified as Kendrick J. Akins, they heard gunshots. When they arrived, they found Akins on the sidewalk with multiple bullet wounds. He also died.

No motive has been determined, and detectives still are looking for information.

Hardee County sheriff's officials hope they can clear up a cold case file, with the extradition of 52-year-old Anselmo Avalos. He is wanted in the 1993 slaying of a 21-year-old woman at Clamen's Mobile Home Park.

Reportedly the victim - who was not identified - had her throat slashed during an argument with Avalos. However, it took authorities nearly two decades to find his whereabouts.

They finally got information from the FBI that Avalos was in Mexico, and began extradition proceedings. He now is back in Hardee County.

It'll be a busy session for the Frostproof city council tonight. They first will take action finalizing an ordinance regulating food trucks in the Friendly city, then will look at an annexation that would bring 11.5 acres of groveland inside the city limits.

In other action, the council will look at setting the municipal fire assessment for the upcoming fiscal year, and will hear a presentation from representatives of Tillman Fiber about building a high speed internet service for the city.

## AUGUST 8

It's not global warming - it's August in Florida. Officials of the National Weather Service say there's a heat wave and it's going to be a scorcher in Highlands County and throughout the Sunshine State today.

Weather service authorities have issued a Heat Advisory, which will be in effect until 7:00 this evening.

Heat index values of as much as 112 degrees are expected. That could result in heat stroke & heat exhaustion among other things.

Health officials advise residents to drink plenty of fluids, stay in an air-conditioned room, and out of the sun. They also suggest checking on relatives and neighbors.

Polk County Sheriff's deputies yesterday took a man into custody following a five-hour standoff at a South Hankin Road residence in the community of Alturas. That's located between Lake Wales and Bartow.

Sheriff's officials say 33-year-old Victor Garcia finally was arrested around quarter-past-five last night. Garcia, who is a convicted felon, was in possession of an AR-15 rifle and a handgun.

When lawmen arrived at the scene, the man barricaded himself inside the house. He has been charged with illegal discharge of a firearm, and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon among other charges.

## AUGUST 9

When it comes to construction, it appears that the Sebring/Avon Park metro area is above the national average. A new study by Construction Coverage shows that 6.8-percent of the jobs here are in the construction industry - that's nearly two percent above the national average.

In fact, there's been better than a 13-percent uptick in construction jobs locally. Some 350 metro areas representing all 50 states were used in the survey.

More blue green algae to report in the water here. Highlands County officials have issued a health alert for the presence of the toxic algae in Lake Istokpoga. The stinky blooms are spawned by sunny days, warm water temperatures and excess nutrients - among other things.

Residents are urged not to drink, swim, wade or use personal watercraft where the algae is present. People also are urged to keep their pets out of the water there.

It no news that it's hot outside, and local officials continue to warn residents to take precautions if they work out of doors. They urge people to know the signs and symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, and wear light and loose-fitting clothing when possible.

The National Weather Service again has an Excessive Heat Warning in effect for Highlands County and the entire Sunshine State.

Heat index values up to 112 degrees again are possible.

It's back to school tomorrow for thousands of youngsters across Highlands County, and motorists are being reminded to be prepared for the start of classes.

There will be dozens of the big yellow busses on the roads tomorrow picking up students, and school zones will be activated with their significantly lower speeds.

A suspect wanted in a January murder case in Hardee County is back in local custody. 36-year-old Matthew Scott Flores has been returned from Rutherford County, North Carolina. Wauchula police say that Flores has been charged with first degree murder, grand theft, and tampering with evidence in the death of Jose Carlos Martinez.

Flores was returned yesterday with the assistance of Florida Department of Law Enforcement agents. It took six months to extradite Flores back to Wauchula.

## AUGUST 10

Today was the first day back in the classroom for Highlands County students in the 2023-24 academic year. School officials say there were no incidents to report on the first day back, and things so far have gone smoothly.

Motorists are reminded that this afternoon school busses will be out again and school zones will be activated with their lowered speed limits. Drivers are cautioned to watch for students walking or riding their bicycles home and to keep an eye out for crossing guards near school facilities.

Highlands County and the entire state of Florida has been under a heat advisory for the past week or so, but it appears that local residents have been dealing with the situation well. Neither local law enforcement nor health officials have reported any calls to deal with cases of heat exhaustion or heat stroke.

Meanwhile, heat advisories remain in place for the Sunshine State. Heat index values up to 115 degrees are expected in some parts of Florida.

Officials continue to advise people to drink plenty of fluids, stay in an air-conditioned room, stay out of the sun and check on relatives and neighbors.

A Hardee County man has been arrested in connection with a shooting in the Leisure Lakes community this past weekend. Highlands County sheriff's officials say 19-year-old Cameron Lee Rios was arrested last night in DeSoto County

He's been charged with two counts of attempted homicide and one count of improper exhibition of a firearm.

The incident occurred early Saturday morning at a large gathering in a wooded area.

Apparently, Rios had been involved in an argument and was waving a handgun around, pointing it at multiple people, before he began firing as people fled.

A 16-year-old male from Okeechobee is still hospitalized after being struck in the torso and a 19-year-old Sebring woman was struck in the ankle and shoulder. She's been released from.

Several people who witnessed the incident identified Rios in a photo lineup as the person who fired the shots.

## AUGUST 11

It continues to be quite warm outside with the National Weather Service issuing another Excessive Heat Warning for Highlands County and across the Sunshine State.

Again, Heat index values of over 100-degrees are expected here.

Officials advise residents to take precautions if they plan to be outside, and know the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke.



So far, health officials have not registered any cases of heat-related illnesses here.

It was back to school for Highlands County youngsters yesterday. The count shows some 11,213 students showed up for classes across the system.

Sebring High school showed the highest overall attendance with 1,783 youngsters in class. Memorial elementary was the lowest with 459. School officials say there were no incidents of note to report on the first day back for the 2023-24 academic year.

Motorists are reminded that the youngsters will be out again waiting for the dozens of busses that will be crisscrossing the county, and to slow down in school zones.

A Polk County trucker has been killed in a Lee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 62-year-old Fort Meade driver was eastbound on County Road 78 north of Cape Coral when the big rig went off the road and slammed into a pair of wooden poles.

He was critically injured and transported to the hospital where he expired.

Lake Wales City Manager James Slaton has announced plans for the City to assume operations of the Family Recreation Center after the West Central Florida YMCA departs in October.

Slanton says the goal is to create what he calls "a fresh, modern space for families to engage in health and wellness activities,"

He said the facility is a landmark in the community, and plans are to make it better by staffing it with people skilled in recreation programming and business management.

The City recently invested more than \$200,000 enhancing the pool. Annual swim lessons are free for city residents.

Teachers in Polk County are upset over what they call atrocious working and learning conditions. The Polk Education Association have filed a grievance over broken air conditioners in 15 schools.

Union President Stephanie Yocum says the situation is unacceptable, and the district must provide a comfortable and healthy environment for teachers, staff, and students.

A district spokesperson says students in classrooms without working AC will be relocated until fixes are made, and the installation of new AC units is taking place as soon as possible.

AUGUST 14

If you've had an ambulance ride in Highlands County, your data may have been compromised. Officials from EMS Management & Consultants say that Highlands County Fire Rescue was one of a number of entities that may have been affected by a data breach at the North Carolina-based firm.

More than 7,000 residents locally and almost a quarter million nationally may have been affected in the incident. It remains unclear who hacked into the system.

A class action suit already has been started against the company - which provides billing and collection services to emergency medical and other such services across the country.

Avon Park city council members are slated to start looking at the homeless problem in the City of Charm. The council is set to schedule a workshop on the subject when they meet tonight in regular session.

In other action, the council will look at a lease with the Avon Park Senior Activities Center for use of the shuffleboard courts on Main Street.

Highlands County school officials say their first day attendance numbers last week were down from the start of the last school year. But they note that many local youngsters don't show up for the first day of classes. They look forward to counts this week and next week for an increase in the student census.

Keeping track of kids in class also is exacerbated by the increase in private, parochial and other schools, as well as an increasing number of parents who have chosen to homeschool.

Public school system funding from the state is based in large part on attendance.

Four people were injured in a weekend hit-and-run accident near Bartow. It happened yesterday morning on Ronald Reagan Parkway.

Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a trooper tried pulling over a speeding Ford Mustang, but the driver kept going and crashed into a Sport Utility Vehicle.

The Mustang driver and a passenger ran off; however the passenger later was apprehended.

Polk County sheriff's officials say the driver remains on the loose. He has been identified as Haines City 18-year-old Ramon Santiago-Garcia. Two Mustang passengers and a passenger in the SUV were taken to the hospital. There's no

word on their conditions. Troopers say the woman driving the SUV was also taken to the hospital and is in serious condition.

## AUGUST 15

Sebring police are investigating a morning shooting incident. It occurred shortly after 8:30 this morning. According to early reports, someone was either shooting from or at a moving vehicle.

There were no injuries reported, but at least one parked car was hit by a round. The incident remains under investigation. Anyone with information is asked to call the Sebring Police Department at 471-5800.

Highlands County commissioners this morning passed a revised fire assessment for the county. Changes were made in response to new state laws exempting agricultural lands from such charges

The levy includes a seven percent increase in each of the eligible categories.

Commissioners agreed to change more agricultural land to housing. One is a nearly 20-acre site, the other is nearly 10-acres. Both reportedly are slated to become mobile home communities.

The commission plans to hold a workshop on the proliferation of mobile home communities. At least one Sebring city council member has indicated they'd like to be part of that meeting as well.

It was a marathon session for the Avon Park city council last night. They started with a two-hour budget workshop, trying to craft the municipal fire assessment

and other such charges to bring relief to property tax payers and still meet the needs of the city.

They'll take it all up again in at their next regular meeting on the 28th. In other action, the council decided to hold a special meeting next Monday to deal with the homeless problem in the city of charm.

Back to school can be bad enough for some youngsters, but in Polk County, the air conditioning reportedly is out at dozens of schools.

Polk Education Association President Stephanie Yocum said yesterday that 30 schools lack A-C. That's double the number that didn't have A-C on the first day of school.

There's no word on when all the broken units will be fixed. One teacher has said it's both "ridiculous and unfathomable."

## AUGUST 16

Highlands county parent Jesse Sapp came before the Highlands county school board last night to discuss the use of Chromebooks in the classrooms. He maintained that the computers are causing students to lose skills such as writing and spelling.

He noted that Highlands County school accountability numbers appear to have suffered since the introduction of the devices.

By Sapp's calculations, the Chromebooks come out to \$700 per student. He advocated for the return to hardback books.

Sebring city council members met last night in regular session. They held a public hearing and final reading on their fire assessment for the city. The levy will jump from \$115 to \$130 per year for residential properties with corresponding hikes to commercial, industrial and institutional zones as well as nursing homes and vacant lots.

The assessment is used to offset property taxes.

In other action, the council got an update from Boys & Girls Club Interim Executive Director Janice Rearick about activities at the local club.

## AUGUST 17

Many people have heard the news that Aldi is acquiring nearly 400 Winn-Dixie and Harveys supermarkets across the Southeast. What that means locally remains unclear. There's one Aldi location west of Sebring with Winn-Dixie locations in Avon Park, Sebring and Lake Placid.

Corporate officials say some of the Winn-Dixie locations will keep their red and white branding and store layout, while others will convert to the Aldi look.

Aldi locations also will be added across Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana.

A discussion of the homeless problem capped the Sebring city council meeting. It revolved around a new ordinance that will regulate camping and fires on public property.

The measure is designed to curb vagrancy in the city. It would limit the time people could sleep on public land to a half hour, and would disallow pitching tents without prior council approval.

Katy Beatty of the New Testament Church & Mission addressed the issue, saying homeless are being bussed in to Highlands County and that both her facility and the sheriff's office already are overwhelmed.

Sebring Mayor John Shoop said the new generation of homeless are more aggressive and mean.

The Avon Park city council will hold a special workshop in the issue next Monday evening.

The problem of sewage disposal again is hitting Highlands County. Local hauler Jason Harris came before county commissioners saying his business has been limited, due to only one local facility that could accommodate his needs.

Harris said he was limited to only 8,000 gallons a week at the Avon Park dump site - when it's open and that's not nearly enough. He said other local septic services are having the same issue.

Highlands County Administrator Laurie Hurner said she would have the county's critical infrastructure department get in touch with him, to see if the county might step in to help with the issue.

A couple of Frostproof businesses are candidates in a new effort by StoryRoad to find the best businesses in Florida. P&J Recreation and The Frostbite of the candidates are listed in the Bars and American Cuisine divisions respectively.

Those who want to vote may go to "guide to Florida dot com" and cast their ballots.

AUGUST 21

Avon Park city council members will gather this evening for a special workshop session to look at the problem of homelessness in the City of Charm.

They called the meeting after repeated complaints about the issue, most notably people taking up residence in the historic gazebo on the mall.

Representatives of local charities and the faith community are expected to be at tonight's workshop. Both the Highlands County commission and the Sebring city council also are planning meetings to discuss the issue.

Sebring firefighters were called to a conflagration over the weekend. A home on Lakeview Drive known as "The Elrod House" was all but destroyed in the early morning blaze.

The two-story house was fully involved in flames when units arrived at the scene. The house reportedly had been standing vacant for some time.

No injuries were reported. Cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Highlands County sheriff's deputies reportedly helped Hardee County a bit over the weekend, with the apprehension of a wanted man. Clayton Paul McIntyre had been wanted since February.

A change to the Bartow liquor law could be in the offing. The Bartow City Commission will meet today to discuss allowing alcohol sales to begin earlier on Sundays.

Currently, alcohol cannot be served before noon on Sundays, but restaurants that serve brunch want that changed to 9:00 a.m.



The Idlewild Venue is one place that would benefit from the change. Restaurant officials say it would ensure they don't lose business to nearby communities.

AUGUST 22

For decades, the Salvation Army has been handling probation and social services for Highlands County. That all will come to a close this November, when those duties will be handed back to the county.

By state statute, counties are required to provide those functions. Apparently, Highlands county officials say they no longer will contract it out, and will bring those duties under an existing department. Commissioners have allocated a quarter million dollars to take care of the start-up.

Staff members now are studying the program budget, number of cases, staffing and other resources needed - as well as where to house it.

The scam artists are at it again - this time in The Friendly City. Polk County Sheriff's Officials - who provide law enforcement for the city of Frostproof - say they have received reports that people are out requesting donations for Ben Hill Griffin, Jr. Elementary school.

They say that that neither of the Frostproof schools are soliciting funds at this time.

Officers of the Wauchula Police Department yesterday successfully relocated a gator from a bus stop at the Valencia Gardens Apartments.

The 3-to-4 foot gator reportedly was spotted and removed during a time that no children were present. He was returned to the wild without incident.

Lightning is blamed for killing three horses in Polk County. It happened near Lakeland at a ranch owned by District Five County Commissioner Neil Combee.

He says three of the horses were instantly killed, with a fourth suffering serious injury. Combee says people need to be aware just how dangerous lightning can be.

## AUGUST 25

As we head into the Hurricane Season in earnest, there seems to be some activity in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Currently, only one system could affect Florida. Simply labeled "Disturbance Number Three," weather experts say it could move up through the Caribbean and hit western Florida by next week.

How much it could develop and its effect on Highlands County has yet to be determined.

There's an easy way to get prepared. Citizens can save on hurricane prep items starting tomorrow. The Florida Disaster Preparedness Sales Tax Holiday will run for two weeks until September 8th.

Residents can stock up on items like portable generators, tarps, smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, tax free.

A full list of eligible items is available at [FloridaRevenue-dot-com](http://FloridaRevenue-dot-com).

Keglers can rejoice, for the first time in years, there will be a bowling alley in the area. Hardee County Chamber of Commerce officials will host a ribbon cutting and grand opening ceremony for "Bowl of Fun Lanes" in Wauchula tomorrow.

The dozen lane center had been closed for about a year, but will reopen tomorrow as a full service facility, complete with snack bar.

A soft opening had to be put off, so this will be the first time bowlers will have an official chance to roll...

A temporary change that was a hit in Polk County during the pandemic now will become a way of life. The city of Winter Haven is making sidewalk cafes a permanent fixture downtown.

Twenty parking spots on Central Avenue will be replaced with tables and chairs. The project is expected to cost about a million dollars, and it should be done by Thanksgiving.

City officials say access to all businesses will be open for the entire project, and street closures will only be temporary during some phases of the project.

## AUGUST 28

Residents in Highlands County and across the Sunshine State are preparing as Tropical Storm Idalia heads north through the Caribbean. As of this morning, the storm is expected to have hurricane strength by the time it makes landfall. The track has shifted farther toward the east closer to Tampa.

Highlands County is expected to get bands of weather from this system - although currently we are not listed on the state of emergency proclamation.

Highlands County school officials are planning a meeting with other agencies this afternoon. They say it's still too early to determine if schools should be closed or to use the facilities as hurricane shelters. Stay tuned for updates.

Sand for sandbags also is available at South George Boulevard just north of the Highlands County Emergency Operations Center. Residents should bring a shovel and a partner to help if needed. This is currently the only location with sand. County officials say there are no sandbags for distribution at this time. They may be obtained at several home improvement locations and some hardware stores.

Meanwhile, The National Hurricane Center says Idalia could be here as soon as Wednesday when it's expected to reach the Gulf Coast. Authorities are watching to see how the storm develops.

It's going to be a triple header for the Avon Park city council this evening. They first will convene at 4:00 for a special budget meeting.

At 5:00, the council will hold a joint session with the Community Redevelopment Agency, following a budget presentation, Mayor Garrett Anderson wants to discuss a vision and special projects for the city of Charm.

Tonight's regular council meeting will commence at 6pm. Among other things, the council is expected to discuss an agreement with the Florida Department of Transportation on the airport improvement project and will hear from consultants Florida Airport Management about appropriations they are seeking for projects at the airport.

A car fire sparked a wildfire on Dressel Road in Avon Park yesterday afternoon. According to reports, it was fully involved upon arrival and was spreading to the nearby field. Crews from West Sebring quickly brought the flames under control. The cause of the fire was ruled accidental and there were no injuries.

Speed is suspected in a crash that killed a teenager in Polk County. It happened yesterday morning at CR 540A and Quails Ridge Drive.

The sheriff's office says Lakeland 18-year-old Luis Yadel Neves Boria was speeding when he lost control, went off the road and hit a utility pole. He died at the scene. Lakeland 18-year-old Thomas Terry was his passenger. He was airlifted to the hospital and is in critical condition.

## AUGUST 29

Preparations are stepping up today as Hurricane Idalia rumbles northward through the Caribbean. Forecasters still are predicting the storm will make landfall as a Category III in the big bend area of Florida.

The Highlands County Emergency Operations Center has moved to a Level 2 activation they say rain chances will increase this afternoon as the bands move onshore. Highlands County is not under any watches or warnings but could see numerous tropical storm force wind gusts.

The Highlands County school system is holding classes today. However, they will be closed tomorrow. South Florida State College is closed both today and tomorrow.

Both the Highlands County commission and the Highlands County School board held special sessions this morning and declared a state of emergency. Avon Park council took similar action at their session last night. That makes it easier to get state and federal aid in the aftermath of a storm.

Sand for sandbags remains available on West George Blvd near the Highlands County Emergency Operations Center south of Sebring. It also is available at Lakeview Memorial Gardens on Memorial Drive south of Avon Park. Residents must bring their own shovels and bags.

There are NO plans to open shelters at this time.

When it comes to garbage collection, county officials say they do not expect winds to be strong enough to close the Landfill or suspend garbage collection operations. They plan to reassess the situation this afternoon to see if collection changes need to be made.

Because higher winds are expected overnight, officials are recommending residents consider waiting to place their garbage carts out for collection until 7:00 tomorrow morning.

Some good news for those needing to stock up on hurricane supplies, the Hurricane Supply tax holiday will be on until September 8.

Units from West Sebring were called out last night to extinguish a brush fire north of Sebring. The flames off Arbuckle Creek Road reportedly came from a large pile of construction debris.

Where the pile came from and how it was ignited remains under investigation.

## AUGUST 30

Hurricane Idalia has rolled past most of the peninsula of Florida on its way to the Big Bend area, now classified as a Category 4. Highlands and surrounding counties still have seen some effects of the big storm with some tropical force winds and plenty of rain overnight.

Still, law enforcement and safety service officials say they have not yet received any reports of significant damage.

All Highlands County schools and district offices are closed today, and all afterschool and school related activities are cancelled.

Local schools and district offices will be open tomorrow for normal operations. All extracurricular and school related activities will resume at that time.

Classes for South Florida State College also have been called off for today.

The Highlands County Sheriff's main office lobby, the jail lobby and the lobby of the North District substation in Avon Park will be closed today. As always, dispatchers and deputies will be on duty and ready to answer calls for service.

Highlands County offices, the three local libraries and Fire Rescue administrative offices are closed today. They will reopen tomorrow. Fire and emergency medical services are continuing to operate normally.

All three Highlands County Tax Collector sites will be closed today and will reopen tomorrow. Florida Department of Health offices in Sebring, Lake Placid and Avon Park also are closed today.

Highlands County Clerk of Courts Jerome Kasubowski says his office will remain open today and all court hearings will be conducted as normal.

The County Landfill and garbage collection services will continue as normal today.

## SEPTEMBER 4

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## SEPTEMBER 5

Highlands County school board members will get an update on Florida House Bill One tonight, and how the voucher program may affect schools, parents and students.

State Representative Kaylee Tuck, who represents Highlands County - and was a sponsor of the measure, will address the board this evening to discuss how the new state law expands school choice for local families and how it might affect the district schools.

The regular school board meeting will commence at 5:30. Prior to that, the board will hold a public hearing on their final budget for the 2023-24 fiscal year. That will start at 5:05.

The use of Lake Jackson and public parks will be on the minds of Sebring city council members when they get together in regular session this evening. At issue is a local couple who have been running a business renting watercraft out of their lakefront home.



Apparently the citizens had a deal with the city to use nearby Veterans Beach, before their operation grew into a full-fledged business. Council members will discuss that and more about the lake tonight.

In other action, the council will hear a plea from a local mobile home park owner not to annex his property and will honor outgoing Sebring Police Commander Curtis Hart.

It will be a couple of days before Highlands County commissioners meet for their regular session. Due to Monday's government observance of the Labor Day holiday their meeting date has been pushed back to Thursday.

Apparently, county staff has not had sufficient time to prepare for a Tuesday meeting after a three-day weekend.

A Lake Wales man is accused of killing his teenage son. Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd says Stephen Thomas Rodda was arrested after 16-year-old Stephen Rodda was found dead at his grandfather's house.

Judd says the 37-year-old killed the teen with an angle grinder in the home off Old Bartow Road.

There's no word on a motive.

The younger Rodda was a junior at Frostproof High School, and Judd says he was studying to be an electrician. Judd says the suspect's father told deputies his son has a history of drug use and psychotic episodes.

A man was injured after being shot by sheriff's deputies near Bartow. It happened yesterday while lawmen were chasing Joshua Lee Walker on US Highway 98.

The 32-year-old was wanted for carjacking.

Sheriff Grady Judd said Walker reportedly had tried to run after crashing the car he'd stolen. At one point, Walker allegedly pointed a gun at officers. They shot him, and he's in critical condition.

Judd says Walker learned you don't try that in a small town, and if you do, you get shot, a lot. He also says Walker has a criminal history that's 30 pages long, and it includes eight felony convictions.

A Winter Haven man was killed yesterday in a Polk City traffic crash. Polk County sheriff's officials say the driver, identified as Cameron Gumble lost control and hit a tree.

He died at the scene. Authorities say speed may have been a factor. They say the 26-year-old Winter Haven man was NOT wearing a seatbelt. The force of impact reportedly threw him from the vehicle. A 24-year-old passenger apparently DID have his seatbelt buckled - and suffered only minor injuries.

## SEPTEMBER 7

Eight people have been arrested in Avon Park as part of a drug sweep there. Highlands County Sheriff's investigators say the months-long probe ended Tuesday with the bust on North Lone Bay Boulevard on the west end of the Avon Park Lakes subdivision.

Charged were Christopher Bradley Owens, Brianna Mae Gilmore, Chaz Allen Demeere, Briana Tara Beumel, Wyatt Watson, Jessica Nicole Howell, Tracy Leigh Carerro and Christopher Kemble Owens.

Inside the mobile home, deputies found a large amount of illegal narcotics, including; 29 grams of fentanyl, 8.5 grams of oxycodone, 155 grams of marijuana as well as several grams of other prescription pills.

The search also turned up two firearms (one of them a stolen shotgun), and an electric scooter that had been reported stolen in California.

The investigation is continuing.

An early morning accident on State Road 60 this morning involved a Desoto County Sheriff's Crusier. Early reports indicate the deputy actually lives in Highlands County and hit a deer.

Two cars came together yesterday afternoon on Highway 27 in front of the River Greens neighborhood. Traffic was tied up for some time there.

No word as to the extent of injuries in either mishap.

Highlands County commissioners held their regular session this morning. Their normal Tuesday meeting was pushed back to Thursday, due to Monday's government observance of Labor Day.

Commissioners approved the next steps in the construction of both a traffic operations building and a special needs shelter. Commissioner Scott Kerouac noted that the funds all are from federal CARES act money - and not from the county's general fund.

The commission also voted to declare surplus and donate some 21 acres of property to the co-called Spring Lake ECO Park. County officials say the parcel is extremely wet and not suitable for housing.

Frostproof city council members will meet tonight and will be expanding The Friendly City. More than 100 acres could be added.

They'll first hear the second reading of a measure that will annex nearly 55 acres off Tyre Road into the Friendly City. Fifty more acres off Davis Keen Road also are up for consideration, as well as a seven acre parcel off Wes Mann Road.

Council members also will consider changing some six acres of property at Highway 630 East and Mullinsville Road from Agricultural to Commercial.

In other action the council will amend their land use map to allow 18-acres at Highway 630 East and Fort Meade Road to become a mobile home park.

## SEPTEMBER 8

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives are seeking information to help solve a murder. They are looking for anyone who came in contact with Douglas Lieland, also known as "Slim," between Monday Aug. 28 and Thursday Aug. 31.

Lieland was found inside his home on San Jose Avenue in the Lake Letta/Bonnett Lake area - south of Avon Park on the morning of Aug. 31, the victim of an apparent homicide.

Detectives are working to find his killer. Anyone who had contact with Lieland after August 28 is asked to call the Sheriff's office, as they try to unravel the case.

A boil water notice remains in effect for the city of Avon Park, following a second water main break there. The first occurred yesterday, when crews apparently were clearing a lot near Lake Isis.

Now, officials say there has been a second rupture. Crews have been working all morning to remedy the problem.

Residents are urged to boil water used for drinking, food preparation, dish washing or other such purposes.

It'll be a big day tomorrow, as members of NASGRASS hold a soft opening of their new racing facility at Florida Flywheelers Park. The lawn mower racing group had raced at their facility at the Avon Park airport for decades before being deposited earlier this year. The group has spent the last six months moving out and constructing the entirely new facility.

The new track is located at Florida Flywheeler's Park on the Avon Park Cutoff Road. Gates will open tomorrow at noon for test & tune sessions. The first races will commence tomorrow evening at 6pm.

## SEPTEMBER 11

Today is 9/11. It's the 22nd anniversary of the day the twin towers came down in New York, the Pentagon was attacked in Washington and Flight 93 was downed in Pennsylvania.

There was one observance in Highlands County. That was this morning at American Legion Post 25 north of Lake Placid. Guest Speaker was be US Army retired Lt. Col Jason Long. Saturday morning there also was an observance at the West Sebring Fire Department.

Avon Park city council members will discuss taxes and fees when they meet tonight in regular session. They'll first hold a public hearing, and set the annual fire assessment for the City of Charm. The current plan calls for \$185 per residential unit, as well as fees for commercial, industrial, governmental, institutional and vacant properties.

The council also will consider a resolution for the tentative budget and mileage rate for the upcoming fiscal year.

The council also will hear the first reading of a new "FOG Program," regulating the amounts of fats, oils and grease allowed to be discharged into the municipal sewer system.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies made an arrest over the weekend, but he wasn't taken in handcuffs. Deputy Gage Massey put his skills as a former Animal Services Officer to use to wrangle a rattlesnake from a Sebring address.

The rattler was taken to Animal Services, where it will be turned over to Graziani Reptiles, who will use it to make anti-venom.

Highway 27 at the Sebring Parkway had a major traffic snarl this morning as two vehicles collided there. Apparently, no serious injuries in the mishap, but traffic - especially southbound - was blocked for a time as the scene was cleared.

It had been six months since NASGRASS was deposed from their historic Avon Park airport location, but the lawn mower racers made it count this past Saturday night with a record crowd at their new facility at Florida Flywheelers Park. Stands were packed and cars lined the perimeter of the track as nearly 40 mowers took to the new facility.

Organizers called it a "soft opening," with grand opening races to be held at the new park next month.

A drowning that claimed the life of a four-year-old is under investigation. The boy drowned Saturday afternoon in Lakeland. He was found underwater at View Way and taken to Lakeland Regional Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead. Police say the boy was in the water for around eight minutes before being located.

## SEPTEMBER 12

Some heavy weather rolled through central Florida early this morning, with rain and lots of lightning. Apparently, it set off alarms throughout eastern Hardee, Southern Polk and Highlands County.

Authorities say despite the rain, thunder and lightning - no flooding or other damage has been reported.

Highlands County commissioners will hold a special workshop today to discuss homelessness and mental health services in the county. That session will be held in the Jack Stroup civic center at the Alan Altvader Cultural Complex on the shores of Lake Jackson in Sebring.

Up for discussion will be substance abuse, affordable housing, wages, veterans' status and mental health in relation to the homeless population.

The session is slated to get underway at 1:00 this afternoon.

Avon Park city council members met for better than three hours last night, hammering out their final budget for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year. They voted to set the fire assessment at \$154 per residential unit, up from the current \$140 annual assessment, with corresponding hikes in other fees including industrial and institutional rates.

Council members got good news, with a big drop in insurance rates. They were able to keep their millage at 4.3681 - or \$4.36 for each \$1,000 of taxable valuation.

That's the same as this past year.

One man was killed and several people were injured yesterday on Highway 60 east of Lake Wales. According to Polk County Sheriff's reports, a car driven by a 15-year-old Lake Wales youth, turned into the path of an oncoming pickup.

Following the crash, a driver from Melbourne stopped to help the victims. He was killed when a van ploughed into the pickup, which then hit him. The Good Samaritan was pronounced dead at the scene.

Authorities still are searching for the occupants of the van - who fled the scene.

## SEPTEMBER 13

Highlands County is not a hotbed for millennials, so it should come as no surprise the area ranked so low for home loans by that age group in a recent survey. The study, compiled by Construction Coverage showed that the Sebring/Avon Park metro area was the fourth lowest for millennials taking out home loans.

Millennials are regarded as individuals born between 1981 and 1996. The average here was just under 27-percent, well below the national average of 58-percent.

The average loan amount also was lower. The average here was \$215,000 while nationally, the average was set at \$335,000.

Three people are dead and two more are in critical condition after a crash in Polk County. An SUV turned into the path of a car Monday night in Lakeland, causing the SUV to spin and hit a utility pole.



Thirty-three-year-old Mavaria Carter and two of her children- a 6-year-old girl and 13-year-old boy- died.

Carter's 30-year-old brother Jeremy Felton and her 14-year-old son are in critical condition. The 20-year-old driver of the car was taken to the hospital and is expected to survive.

Polk County Sheriff's officials are investigating after a 15-year-old was found dead in Winter Haven. The boy was found shot in a driveway around 2:30 yesterday morning.

The victim has been identified as Quashawn Burgess Junior. Reportedly, he was on probation for a trespassing charge. Police believe the shooter may have known Burgess.

## SEPTEMBER 14

Avon Park city council members have turned back a request for a raise from Florida Airport Management. The group, which has taken over the operation of the Avon Park airfield, had asked for an increase in their monthly allocation from \$10,000 to \$25,000 a month - while they run the facility and pursue a grant from the Federal Aviation Administration.

Mayor Garrett Anderson told the group, he wanted to be clearer on airport operation and other costs before taking any actions. FAM representatives told council they hoped to have the grant closed by the first of next year.

Sebring city council members will hold a workshop this evening on the use of Lake Jackson. The big lake is home to a variety of watercraft - from kayaks to

seaplanes. At issue this evening will be a rental service, which currently is renting watercraft out of a private home - which violates zoning laws.

Council members will discuss whether or not they want to regulate such businesses out of public parks. Tonight's session will commence at 5:30 at Sebring city hall.

Competitors who like to run the Sebring International Raceway soon may have some new lodging facilities. Apex Motor Garages has broken ground for a development less than a mile from the historic track.

Designed for racers, options will range from man-caves to three bedroom/three bath townhomes, with garages located beneath the living space.

It's back! The Florida Department of Health in Highlands County has issued a health alert of harmful blue-green algal toxins at the Lake Glenada Boat Ramp, south of Avon Park.

The warning comes in response to a water sample taken earlier this month. Authorities say residents should exercise caution in the area.

They say people should not drink, swim, wade, use personal watercraft, water ski, or boat in waters where there is a visible bloom.

Wash both skin and clothing with soap and water if you have contact with algae or discolored or smelly water. And keep pets away from the area.

## SEPTEMBER 18

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives are unravelling the circumstances around an apparent murder. A 21-year-old Avon Park man was found shot to death

behind a home on South A Avenue in the City of Charm during the early morning hours over the weekend.

Authorities say the homeowner found the body about 1AM after hearing gunshots. Sheriff's authorities are asking anybody with information on the incident to contact them.

The city of Frostproof will grow this evening when their city council meets. They will hear the second and final reading on an annexation proposal, bringing more than 50 acres under municipal jurisdiction. The property, off Davis Keen Road, is owned by Norris Citrus Groves.

In other action, the council will hear from Avon Park Air Force Range Operations Director Charles "Buck" McLaughlin about the Compatible Use Plan for the Range, and will look at the Evaluation & Appraisal Report for their Comprehensive Plan.

Today is the birthday of the United States Air Force, and the Military Sea Services Museum in Sebring will be holding a party for the flyboys. Everyone - but especially Air Force veterans - is invited to the facility on Kenilworth Blvd for free cake and ice cream - and to have a look around the facility.

The festivities will commence this afternoon at 1:00.

## SEPTEMBER 19

It will be a split shift for the Highlands County commission today. At their regular session this morning the commission voted by a 3-2 margin to change zoning on a 38-acre parcel off Mike Kahn Road east of the Sebring Parkway. It will go from agricultural to a mobile home district.

Planned is a 220 unit mobile home park. Commission chairman Christopher Campbell said he voted against the move, preferring to wait for an upcoming workshop on mobile home communities in the county.

At 5:30 this afternoon, the commission will hold a public hearing, then take final action on the budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

An early morning traffic stop yielded a drug bust, when Highlands County sheriff's deputies stopped a man riding a bicycle in Avon Park without the benefit of lights or reflectors. According to reports, 27-year-old Danilo Melendez was pulling a homemade trailer at the time.

When deputies began searching a tool box on the trailer, Melendez reportedly took off running. He was found later in the trash compactor at the nearby MacDonalds.

Melendez was taken into custody with the help of K-9 Drax. Deputies also confiscated prescription pills, methamphetamine and drug paraphernalia. He was taken to the Highlands County jail.

A Hardee county trucker reportedly was involved in a fatal traffic crash in Desoto County. According to reports, a pickup was northbound on US 17, and ran head-on into a semi-truck, driven by the Hardee county man. The pickup then burst into flames.

The identity of the pickup driver was not released.

Polk County Sheriff's officials believe they have solved the murder of a Bartow youth. The body of 15-year-old Quashawn Burgess jr was found in the yard of a Winter Haven Home. He had been shot and killed.

Polk detectives have announced the arrest of four suspects they believe to have been involved in the incident. Using video evidence, they found 20-year Rashan Harris II, who gave officers a story as to what happened.

He told deputies Burgess had been killed during a robbery attempt. Harris, a woman identified as Lilia Gonzales and two others have been charged in the complex series of events.

A Polk County man is facing charges for a deadly hit-and-run in Hillsborough County. Plant City Police have arrested Mulberry's Thomas Barnard for a crash Friday that killed a 60-year-old man riding a bike.

Investigators say the 39-year-old Barnard admitted he was driving the car that hit the victim. He's charged with leaving the scene of a crash involving death.

## SEPTEMBER 20

Load in starts today for the Fanatec GT World Challenge America. The series will be back at the Sebring International Raceway for a three day competition which officially begins Friday.

A full slate of GT cars from Mercedes and Porsche to BMW and Acura will be on track. Drivers in for the event include 12 Hour favorites such as Johnny O'Connell, Bryan Sellers, Madison Snow and former Sebring winner Bill Auberlin.

Cars will be on track for the first time tomorrow for practice sessions.

The cities of Sebring and Avon Park have made a list they probably don't want to be on - as one of the poorest cities in Florida. Sebring was ranked at #5 with Avon Park at #6 in the Top 10 list.

The report says Sebring has the 8th lowest median income in the state. Meanwhile, the City of Charm is said to have the 22nd highest incidence of poverty and the 3rd highest unemployment rate.

The top four include Opa Locka, Belle Glade, Palatka and Pahokee.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say they're seeing a new wrinkle on an old scam. A local resident received a text message saying there was a warrant for her arrest - on an actual warrant form.

Authorities remind residents, those who have warrants don't get a phone call, they get a visit from a uniformed deputy. Also, paying off a fine, does not cancel a warrant.

Anyone who receives such communications, or has questions about the process, is invited to call the Sheriff's Office.

## SEPTEMBER 21

There's action on the track at the Sebring International Raceway today as the Fanatec GT World Challenge America cars run their test & tune sessions in preparation for the upcoming race weekend. Practice laps will be held tomorrow.

On the circuit will be Fanatec GT World Challenge, Pirelli GT4 America, Toyota Gazoo Racing GR Cup and TC America division cars. Racing will be held Saturday and Sunday.

There were no serious injuries last night when a car hit a pole. That one happened shortly after 9PM near the intersection of Cloverleaf and Twin Lakes Road near Lake Placid.

No names were released. The incident remains under investigation.

Polk County Sheriff's officials are investigating a drowning incident. Deputies and fire/rescue units were called to a home in Indian Lakes Estates, east of Lake Wales, where a 6-year-old drown.

Authorities say life saving measures were unsuccessful in reviving the boy. No other details on that incident have yet been released.

## SEPTEMBER 25

It'll be a big meeting for the Avon Park city council tonight when they get together for their last meeting of September. They'll first hold public hearings and approvals for their millage rate and budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

Although they voted to leave their millage rate unchanged, tax totals in the city of charm may rise due to increased property valuations in the county.

In other action, the council will look at implementing state-mandated impact reports for legislation they pass and its effect on business, and again will discuss a request from the Florida Airport Management group regarding a pay raise for their activities at the city's airport.

Firefighters from Desoto City, Leisure Lakes, and Lake Placid were called out to put out a house fire. Reportedly, the vacant mobile home was located off Rising R Road in Lake Placid.

No injuries were reported in the incident, cause of the fire remains under investigation. No damage estimate was released.

SEPTEMBER 26

A pre-dawn fatal traffic accident in Highlands County blocked Highway 27 south of Highway 70 near Venus for quite a while this morning. Reportedly the mishap involving a semi-truck occurred near the intersection of Archbold road around 3:30.

Florida Highway Patrol officials have released no other details.

Avon Park residents will see a bit of a property tax increase this year. Although city council members last night voted to leave the millage at 4.3681, due to an increase in property values this year, the action represents a 13.6-percent increase over the rollback rate. That's the rate that would have produced the same amount of taxes as last year.

There were no speakers at the public hearings for the millage rate, or to establish the budget for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year in the City of Charm.

Highlands County residents will have an opportunity to speak with Florida State Senator Erin Grall this evening. Grall will appear at the Highlands Tea Party. She is expected to give a review of last year's session, current statewide events and a preview of what to expect in Tallahassee in the upcoming session.

Grall also will hold a question and answer time. The Tea Party meets Tuesday evenings at the Vietnam Veteran's Hall, 33565 Grand Prix Drive - behind the Sebring Walmart. The meeting will commence at 6PM

SEPTEMBER 27



It may be that time of year, reports are coming in about the sightings of Love Bugs again. The insects that "fly united" come twice a year - once in the spring, then again in the fall. So far, the infestation appears to be light.

Acting on the advice of consultants, Avon Park city council members have voted to give the Florida Airport Management group a raise. They voted to give them another five grand. The new \$15,000 per month total is about half again what the group had been receiving - but is less than the \$25,000 monthly stipend that FAM had requested.

Consultant Lowell Clary told the council, the city will be able to recoup the money, when a pending Federal Aviation Administration grant comes through. FAM officials say they hope to have that all wrapped up by Christmas.

Those planning for Trick or Treat activities can look to Saturday, October 28 as the day the little monsters can go out for Beggars Night. Highlands County and the cities of Avon Park and Sebring have agreed that will be their official date.

Reportedly, the Town of Lake Placid will have a Halloween Block Party and trick or treating on the traditional October 31st. That will be a Tuesday evening.