

Jan 2

Officials at Advent Health Sebring have revealed Highlands County has a couple of new citizens. Our first baby of the New Year was a boy, born just after midnight this morning.

The last baby of 2022 got in under the wire. She was born just after 9pm on New Year's Eve. Officials report both babies and their parents are doing fine.

Law enforcement officials report it was a pretty sane New Year's weekend. There were no traffic crashes to report, no fires, and apparently no firework-related injuries. That being said. Highlands County Sheriff's officials say the deadline for legal fireworks has passed and it's time to cool it with the boom booms.

It's the day after New Year's - but because we kicked off 2023 on a Sunday, that means it's a day off for a lot of people. Government offices are closed, there will be no mail delivery and garbage collection in the county will be pushed back a day.

Banks and many other offices also will be off today giving some employees a comp day.

Hardee County Sheriff's deputies closed out 2022 by making a drug bust. Deputies swooped down on the Rigdon Road address in Wauchula Hills where they reportedly found a drug operation.

The occupants reportedly were arrested. No names or other details have been released.

Jan 4

It's been a long, hard road, but officials from Bernie Little Distributing say they are getting ready to ship their first truckloads of Budweiser from their new 63,000 square-foot warehouse off the Sebring Parkway.

It was in February of last year officials broke ground on the major expansion project that will serve Highlands, Hardee, Polk and Okeechobee counties.

They say crews have been moving equipment and furnishings from their former facility south of Sebring for the past few weeks. The first trucks are slated to roll out early this coming Monday morning.

Highlands County Commissioners will meet for their first meeting of the year tomorrow morning. The regular Tuesday session was bumped back to Thursday, due to the government holiday on Monday.

The meeting will begin with Highlands County Supervisor of Elections Karen Healy being sworn in to office.

Most of the meeting will be board housekeeping, including the acceptance of grants and appointments to county board. Also on the table is nearly a million dollars for the county's State Housing Initiative Partnership - or SHIP program.

Polk County Sheriff's officials have revealed a Sebring man was killed New Year's Day in an All-Terrain Vehicle accident just outside Lake Wales. According to reports, 36-year-old Christopher Mears was found in a drainage ditch off Lake Kitsa Drive during the early morning hours Sunday.

Deputies say it appears Mears had been riding the Honda ATV in the area with friends, when he failed to make a turn and was thrown into the ditch - where he apparently drown.

Authorities say speed and impairment appear to be factors in the accident.

Polk County is getting help addressing what Sheriff Grady Judd calls a crisis. The county, last month, received the first installment of money it'll get as part of the opioid settlement reached with major drug companies.

The county got 400-thousand dollars. In total, it'll get 30 million dollars over the next 18 years. Sheriff Judd said yesterday fentanyl is pouring into communities across the country.

He tells ABC Action News in one case, three months ago, his deputies seized enough fentanyl to kill almost three million people.

Jan 5

Highlands County Commissioners met in regular session this morning. There, they had a robust discussion about county maintained and non-county maintained roads, and how conditions on some are so bad that safety and other services will not go down those thoroughfares to customers.

County Attorney Sherry Sutphon called for those who purchase properties to have an affidavit that indicates they know the status of the roads which front their properties.

A couple of teenagers were hurt in apparent gang violence near Lake Wales.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd says his office is investigating the drive-by shootings that occurred about 15 minutes apart.

In the first, nearly 60 shots were fired, with about half of them hitting a house in Highland Park Manor. A 19-year-old woman was hit, but she's expected to survive.

Judd says he believes gang members were targeting her boyfriend.

In the second shooting, 14-year-old and 12-year-old girls were hit by gunfire at a Lake Pierce Ranchettes residence. Judd believes the shooter there had the wrong house.

There's no word on if the incidents are connected.

Jan 6

The 8th Annual Veterans Expo begins today at American Legion Post 69 in Avon Park. The Vietnam and Global War on Terror Travelling Walls will arrive at the Bell Street location and 14 of the planned 52 vendors also will be set up today to help veterans.

The event is designed to highlight resources such as jobs, health and networking for veterans. It is being presented in cooperation with Project Vet Relief. The event runs through Sunday.

Hurricane Ian is now a distant memory, but officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency are reminding folks that grants, disaster loans and flood insurance payments still are available.

Highlands is one of 26 counties designated for such assistance. However, authorities are reminding procrastinators - the deadline for applications for the cash come to a halt next Thursday.

It appears there is little interest in Sebring city council in pursuing the limitation of burlesque and other such presentations in the City on the Circle.

After hearing a presentation from a Highlands County resident, going after a former presenter as an "imposter," at this week's session Sebring City Councilman Lenard Carlisle proclaimed the council are "not the moral police."

No motion was made or action taken on the issue.

Lakeland Police investigators say they believe the deaths of a mother and her two children were no accidents.

A 35-year-old Hardee County woman and her two sons died a week ago after their car wound up in Lake Wire.

Lakeland Police announced yesterday they have determined the woman drove the car into the lake on purpose.

She has been identified as Ortila Zamora. Her sons were nine and four-years-old. Detectives talked to Zamora's family members and discovered she had been dealing with mental health issues.

Jan 9

Officials from Bernie Little Distributing report that, without fanfare, the first trucks rolled out this morning from their new facility off the Sebring Parkway. The first load of Budweiser headed out shortly after 3:00am.

It was in February of last year, officials broke ground on the 63,000 square foot air-conditioned warehouse. Bernie Little has been serving Highlands County since 1972.

The new Anheuser-Busch operation now ships to Highlands, Hardee, Polk and Okeechobee counties.

Members of NASGRASS are slated to show up this evening at the Avon Park city council meeting. At issue there is an environmental study that is being required of the group, to survey the property they use at the corner of the Avon Park airport for their monthly lawn racing competition.

The survey of the former landfill is expected to cost in excess of \$10,000 - money the group says it simply does not have.

In other action this evening, the council will look at appointing members to the city's housing authority and will discuss options for the former Wylde building property.

A reminder to motorists, Highlands County school children are still out on Christmas vacation. But today's the last day. Students will be headed back to class early tomorrow morning.

In the meantime, drivers are urged to watch out for youngsters at play during normal school hours.

Lake Wales police are in search of 29-year-old Dontavious Grant. They believe he may have had something to do with a shooting that occurred New Year's eve in the 700 block of the North Scenic Highway in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

According to reports, the victims were in a moving car when a gunman opened fire. They were able to escape their assailant and call police.

Those with information as to Grant's whereabouts are asked to call the Lake Wales police.

Jan 11

It appears the City of Charm has an invasion of the homeless. The issue came up at the Avon Park city council meeting with City Manager Mark Schrader revealing the issue. Code enforcement officer Randy Labelle said enforcing ordinances on the matter with property owners has been a long and cumbersome process - with people living in cars, tents, and even camping out at the famous Gazebo on the mall.

After repeated requests, Mayor Garrett Anderson assigned City Councilwoman Bernice Taylor with the task of compiling a list of public and private sector organizations who could provide assistance to the people.

Highlands County Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore is coming under fire after last night's school board meeting. Some parents reportedly are unhappy on her stance which reportedly called for the elimination of corporal punishment from the student code of conduct for this year.

Longshore also was criticized for her apparent lack of knowledge over the number of teacher vacancies in the Highlands school system. Some estimates range in excess of 70 openings for educators locally.

It also remains unclear if or when a superintendent-appointed citizens committee might be re-convened to talk about a sex education curriculum in the schools.

You may see cars on trailers headed out to the Sebring International Raceway. Registration, tech inspection and open practice in all divisions begins tomorrow for the Hoosier Racing Tire/SCCA Super Tour Winter Vacation event at SIR.

It's the first of 15 scheduled spectator events at the track, which range from historic cars to the world famous 12 Hours of Sebring coming this March.

If you want to learn more about the Highlands Art League, they will host a "Coffee and Donuts" event at The Clovelly House this morning starting at 9 - that's the blue house with the red trim on Lakeview Drive near the library in downtown Sebring.

The event will feature the The Clovally House and tours of The Weigle House Museum next door.

Jan 12

Memorial Elementary School was evacuated briefly yesterday after the report of something that smelled like gas in the kitchen area. As a precautionary method, the students were evacuated from the building.

An assessment by experts from TECO Energy and Avon Park fire department officials determined it was hydraulic fluid from a faulty cylinder.

School officials say there never was any danger in the situation.

A new study by Move Budda shows that the inflow of new residents to Florida has eased up, and the interest in a couple of local cities has dropped as well. Florida is now eight out of ten in the relocation preference study.

Both Avon Park and Winter Haven also declined as destinations to move in the Sunshine State. Some areas, including The Villages, Ocala and Clermont actually gained in popularity for those looking to move to Florida.

Today is the last day that local residents can apply for disaster assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for damage done during hurricanes Ian or Nicole. Applications must be received by 11:59 tonight to be eligible for consideration.

Those needing further information may call their toll-free number at 1-800-621-3362. FEMA officials say they still will remain in the state to work with long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts.

The Sports Car Club of America's 2023 Season gets underway today with the start of the Hoosier Racing Tire/SCCA Super Tour Winter Vacation event at the Sebring International Raceway.

Test and tune will go on today at the Sebring track with practice sessions for all classes - including both sedans and open-wheel cars. Officials say the combination of the season's first race, and the historic Sebring circuit, brings out a huge field of competitors.

This is the first of 15 spectator events slated for the Sebring Raceway this year - including the Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

Lake Wales Police say they have apprehended 29-year-old Dontavious Grant. He was wanted in connection with a New Year's Eve drive-by shooting in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

An out-of-town couple had their car shot up as they drove on the Scenic Highway. Police say Grant was located and taken into custody in the Winter Haven area without incident.

Jan 13

Avon Park city council members have taken another step in changing the downtown traffic pattern in the City of Charm. They heard from representatives of the Florida Department of Transportation and Renaissance Planning about an effort that would close one of the two lanes on each side of Main Street, to allow for horizontal parking.

That both would slow traffic through the business zone and provide space for more cars in front of businesses there.

The next stop will be a public workshop to unveil the plan and get feedback on the idea from citizens.

Officials from the Jacaranda Hotel say they have used some local merchants to renovate one of their historic suites. Kelly Griffin Cosgrave from Griffin's Carpet was the interior designer for the project. Hotel officials say she took a more boutique modern approach to the design.

The custom items in the room all are available locally, from Griffins Carpet Mart. The sofa is from Turner Furniture, with the accessories obtained from various retail outlets.

Hotel officials are marketing Suite 330 to locals for "a fun night away."

Qualifying gets underway at the Sebring International Raceway today for the Sports Car Club of America's Hoosier Racing Tire Winter Vacation season opener.

Officials of the event say coverage of the race has taken a giant leap. There will be video streaming of the action through the facilities of Drivers Eye Live.

There will be a dozen cameras placed strategically around the track, with a leaderboard that will allow viewers to keep track of who's leading the race.

Sebring will mark the debut of the service.

Jan 16

Highlands is one of a number of central Florida counties that remain under another freeze watch. National Weather Service forecast has predicted lows of 33 degrees, although most temperatures locally have been in the high 30's there was a report of one as low as 31 in some areas.

A complete weather forecast follows the news.

A reminder to motorists- there's no school today due to the Martin Luther King government holiday. Drivers are urged to watch out for youngsters during the times they normally would be in class.

Today is the government observance of the birthday of Martin Luther King jr. That means city, county, state and federal offices will be closed - as well as banks and some other outlets.

The Highlands County Citizens with Voices will hold a Martin Luther King Day Parade. That will kick off at noon, proceed from the Historic Circle, down Ridgewood Drive, to Pine, then to Lemon, ending up on MKL Jr Boulevard.

The procession is expected to last about an hour.

Avon Park code enforcement officers are cleaning up the City of Charm - on an increasing basis. Director Randy LaBelle told council members there has been a 65-percent increase in enforcement over the past year. He says it's due to the city's pro-active approach.

There's also been a commensurate drip in magistrate cases, meaning the city is getting compliance on code enforcement citations.

Labelle said, in addition, agents had pulled up more than 1400 snipe -or illegally placed- signs.

Units from Lake Placid, Sun 'N' Lake South and Placid Lakes were called out over the weekend to quell the flames at the Thornberry Apartments. Firefighters were able to contain the flames to a single unit of the multi-family residence.

No injuries were reported. Cause of the fire and dollar damage estimate has not been released.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say two local men have been arrested and charged with a string of car burglaries as well as stealing the car they used during the crimes.

25-year-old Joseph Isaac Ibanez of Sebring, and 20-year-old Tayler Eddie Pereira of Lake Placid are facing charges of grand theft of a motor vehicle, vehicle burglary, grand theft of a firearm and petit theft in connection with the incidents that took place this past December.

Authorities charge the pair used a stolen truck as part of their operation. Both were booked into the Highlands County jail.

Jan 17

A local resident has won big in the annual American Library Association awards. Vicki Brown, who is the manager of the Highlands County Library System and the coordinator for the Heartland Library Cooperative, is one of 10 recipients of the ALA's

Love My Librarian competition.

She'll get \$5,000 cash plus another \$750 in travel expenses to pick up the hardware at the award ceremony in New Orleans.

Brown was recognized for the establishment of a mobile library that travels to cities throughout the cooperative's service area.

The Highlands County commission meeting - usually held on Tuesdays - will again be pushed back to Thursday morning. This time it's because county offices were closed yesterday due to the government observance of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King.

However, one county commissioner will be working. Don Elwell will host another town hall-style meeting. That will be this evening from 6-8pm at the University Center Auditorium of South Florida State College.

The event will include county updates and a question-and-answer time. As always, refreshments will be served before the session.

Hot on the heels of the observance of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, a pair of African-American activists will address the Highlands Tea Party this evening.

Known collectively as the "Disciples of Truth," K. Carl Smith and CS Bennett will discuss "The Great Reset" and what they term an "endless series of engineered crisis here in the United States."

The Tea Party meets Tuesday evenings in the Vietnam Veterans Hall on Grand Prix Drive behind the Sebring Walmart. Doors open at 5pm.

It appears there will be an election this March in the city of Sebring, with five candidates filing for three seats on the council. Incumbents Lenard Carlisle and Tom Dettman will face challenges from citizens Harrison Havery, Dr. Bobbie Smith-Powell and Josh Stewart.

Josh Stewart is the son of Mark Stewart, a Sebring councilman who decided not to run again this time, calling for new blood on the council.

Both Mayor John Shoop and City Clerk Kathy Haley were returned to office without opposition.

Jan 19

For the second time this month, a government holiday observance has pushed the regular Highlands County Commission meeting to Thursday. So commissioners will meet this morning for their regular session.

Among other things, the board will look at changing the zoning designation for about six acres of property in the Moss Hammock subdivision to allow for the construction of town houses there.

Last year, the county spent time intermittently celebrating the 100th anniversary of Highlands as a county. That will continue this year, the commissioners this morning will be asked to approve the final rendering of a centennial mural. It'll cost \$5,000 - money raised through the sale of centennial T-shirts.

Highlands County fire/rescue officials again are calling on residents to make certain they have legible address numbers on the front of their homes and businesses. The identifiers make it easy for police, fire, ambulance and other first responders to quickly identify those in need.

They say such numbers should be large, on a contrasting background and easy to read from the street. In fact, there is an ordinance on the matter already on the books.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd has a warning for those who don't properly dispose of their trash. Deputies responded yesterday to Lake Wales Estates after a resident complained about illegal dumping.

Judd says his office has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to illegal dumping. He also says he's glad the resident called because seeing trash piled up is not a good image for the community.

Judd said he encourages residents to call when they see illegal dumping to keep the trash from accumulating.

It appears Congressman Greg Steube has been in an accident. Steube, whose district at one time included Highlands County, reportedly toppled from a roof. Details on the incident are sparse, but aides say he fell from the roof of his Sarasota home and was taken to the hospital.

His condition was not released, but officials say he's doing well. Steube is a career politician, having served terms in the Florida house and senate before being elected to the United States Congress.

Jan 20

It appears Highlands local State Representative Kaylee Tuck again is at the edge of major Florida legislation. House Bill One, would establish Education Savings Accounts in the Sunshine State.

Tuck, who serves as Chair of the Choice and Innovation Subcommittee introduced the bill.

Florida House leaders are calling it "Landmark" school choice legislation. The bill reportedly will empower parents and students while elevating levels of education in Florida.

In her first term in office, Tuck successfully sponsored a measure that keeps biological boys and girls competing against each other in High School sports.

Another house fire yesterday, this time it was in the Town & Country Mobile Home Park south of Sebring. When units from Desoto City and West Sebring arrived at the scene, there were flames and smoke showing outside the structure.

Firefighters quickly knocked down the blaze, but the mobile home is considered to be a total loss. No dollar damage estimate or cause has been released.

No injuries were reported.

Preparations are underway for tomorrow's 11th Annual Crazy Pepper Chili Cook-off. Ridgewood and the spoke streets around the Historic Circle in downtown Sebring will be closed off to allow for the contestants and vendors to set up their booths, exhibits and displays.

So far, 15 different teams will vie for the coveted Pepper Pot awards. The event begins Saturday at 9 and runs until 3.

In addition to Chili tasting and a Chili Dog Eating Contest, there will be various vendors and music from recording artist Cory Greenway & The Outtahand Band.

A Polk County doctor is seeing what she calls an explosion in demand for a type 2 diabetes drug. The drug is called Ozempic, and while it's designed for type 2 diabetes, its popularity is due to its effectiveness as a weight loss aide.

Dr. Lilliam Chiques is medical director at the Watson Clinic in Lakeland, and she says demand for Ozempic is making it hard for her type 2 diabetes patients to get it. She says in some cases, she has had to settle for smaller doses or a different drug that's similar to Ozempic.

Jan 24

A pair of weekend shootings are keeping law enforcement officials busy in Highlands County. The first one happened in Sebring. Reportedly, somebody opened fire on a house on Grand Avenue. At least one of the slugs hit somebody inside.

The victim reportedly was taken to a hospital. Their condition has not been released.

A man then was killed in a shooting in Avon Park in the second incident. The body of 22-year-old Lawan Christopher Burns was found at the basketball courts off Fred Conner Street early Saturday. He had been shot to death.

No suspects have been arrested in either incident.

Lawn mower racing again will be on the agenda as the Avon Park city council meets in regular session tonight. A draft agreement that could allow the club to continue racing will be presented by city attorney Gerald Buhr. NASGRASS racers feel that they are being eradicated from their location on the Avon Park airport with the takeover by Florida Airport Management.

City officials say that's simply not the case.

In other action, the city will look at posting a request for proposals for the former Wylde Building property on Main Street and will consider appointments to a number of municipal boards.

A Wauchula man was killed Saturday in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol officials say the driver was eastbound on State Road 64 when he ran off the road and into a ditch. His pickup overturned, coming to rest on its roof.

The 26-year-old driver was pronounced dead at the scene. Troopers say he WAS buckled up.

Jan 25

State Route 70 was closed at County Road 721 for a time this morning. Highlands County Sheriff's officials say that was due to a traffic accident there.

A couple of Highlands County municipalities have some downtown property for sale. Avon Park city council members are issuing a request for proposals for a

Main Street lot that at one time was the Wylde Building. That structure was demolished last year when it became unsound.

The Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency is taking another run at selling off property on Ridgewood Drive where the Nancesowee Hotel once sat.

Previously, developers had proposed a housing unit there - but that project did not materialize.

Some residents south of Sebring are asking for help in finding the person or persons that are shooting deer on their property.

Over the past five months, they say three red stag bucks and three axis bucks have been shot with arrows and left for dead on the property off Payne Road.

In one instance, someone in a truck pulled up to the gate entrance shot an animal, cut a hole in the fence and took the deer.

Others - including a doe - were shot, wounded and simply left. Anyone with information on the incidents is asked to call the Highlands County Sheriff's office.

Wauchula police are on the lookout for Mathew Scott Flores. He reportedly is being regarded as a person of interest in connection with a homicide that occurred yesterday in Hardee County.

Flores is a Hispanic male, approximately 5'8" tall, average build with brown eyes and hair.

Details on the incident have not yet been released, other than to say a man was shot and killed inside the city limits of Wauchula. Authorities say Flores should be considered "armed and dangerous."

Jan 26

If you're looking for a mechanically-inclined person, you're in the wrong place. A new report by Construction Coverage shows that fewer than 12-percent of workers in the Sebring-Avon Park metro area hold occupations that require a mechanical inclination as part of their regular activities.

The 11.7-percent figure places Highlands County third from the bottom in all the places surveyed. That's more than 45-percent below the national average of better than 21-percent.

Another Blue-Green Algae bloom has been found in Highlands County. This time it's at the Lake Placid boat ramp. The first was discovered at Lake Glenada in Avon Park.

Authorities say such blooms have the potential to produce toxins, although what triggers them to do so remains poorly understood.

It is important to exercise caution. Residents are urged not to drink or come in contact with the water - or event to boat or ski in such conditions. Moreover, pets and livestock should be kept clear.

Those who do come in contact with such water are urged to wash thoroughly.

The 12 Hours of Sebring won't arrive until March, but nominations are fixing to close for this year's Stan Durrance Fan of the Year honors.

Every year the Sebring Fan of The Year Advisory Board chooses one lucky person to be named "Sebring Fan of the Year."

Nominations include the name, hometown, years of attendance, favorite Sebring memories, pictures and a description of why he or she should be nominated.

Deadline for the nominations will be at the close of business tomorrow.

Jan 27

The search is on for a new executive director for the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce. Former chamber director George Karos reportedly tendered his resignation and left town.

Apparently, he has moved out west to take a position in public policy for a non-profit organization. Karos headed the chamber in the City of Charm for six years, spearheading numerous events and growing the membership.

It is unknown how many hopefuls have applied for the opening.

One person was critically injured and County Road 64 east of Avon Park was closed for a time last night due to a three-vehicle accident at the 4-way stop on the truck route.

Florida Highway Patrol reports say a truck pulling a trailer ran the stop sign there, hitting two other vehicles. The driver of the car - a 26-year-old Avon Park man - was flown to Lakeland Regional Hospital in critical condition. No other serious injuries were reported.

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office has announced their first female K-9 officer. Deputy Alex Brock will be working with K-9 Drax. The pair reportedly already have started the process of team building and training to become certified.

Brock started with the Sheriff's office in 2014, working as a dispatcher and in the Detention Bureau. She then became a Uniform Patrol Deputy, and worked as a Detective in the Special Victims Unit.

Earlier this month Florida House Representative Kaylee Tuck introduced what was termed "landmark legislation" on school choice. Today, a number of citizens plan a demonstration in favor of the measure.

Known as House Bill One, it would establish Educational Savings Accounts for parents, which would allow them to send their children to a school of their choice.

The flag wave will be held at 3:00 in front of the Fairmount Cinema Square shopping plaza on Highway 27. Tuck's district includes Highlands County.

Jan 30

Highlands County School Board members will get together this afternoon for a workshop. They'll be looking at the comprehensive health education program for middle and high school students - which may include the sex education portion of the curriculum.

It was sex education that drew sharp criticism last year both for the what was being taught and the way the iMAD program was presenting the material to youngsters.

The workshop will commence at 4:30 this afternoon at the Garland Boggus meeting room at the Highlands County School Board offices.

Avon Park was crawling with law enforcement Saturday as Highlands County Sheriff's deputies conducted a weekend raid. Four arrests were made by the Criminal Investigations Unit at the South Carolina Avenue address.

34-year-old Anthony Brice Smith was charged with: Trafficking in fentanyl, manufacture or delivery drug equipment, possession of a controlled substance and concealing evidence.

50-year-old Willie Henry Gammage Jr. was charged with: Possession of cocaine, possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug equipment.

32-year-old Demetrius Lamar Jones was charged with: violation of probation and giving false identification to law enforcement.

And 39-year-old William Alston Clarke was charged with: a warrant for failure to appear.

All were taken to the Highlands county jail.

A Lake Alfred man was killed Saturday evening in a single-vehicle crash in the Frostproof area.

Deputies from the Polk County Sheriff's Office were dispatched to the scene where they found 38-year old Bryam Torres. Reports say the gray 2011 Isuzu Trooper was northbound on US 27 when it left the roadway and flipped multiple times.

Torres, who not wearing a seatbelt was ejected.

The two northbound lanes of US 27 were shut down for about an hour. The crash remains under investigation.

Jan 31

Highlands County school board members met last night in a four hour workshop to discuss a pair of vendor proposals to present a "comprehensive health education program" to local middle and high school students.

After hearing a pair of hour long presentations, then a stream of comments from educators, citizens and members of a committee appointed by Highlands County Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore, the board called for a special meeting to deal with the "sex education" portion of the curriculum.

The February 8th session will be held in the afternoon and will discuss the "Relationships Under Construction" program. In the meantime, the RUC staff will be getting a printed copy ready for citizen review, and county staff reportedly again will contact the state for direction on the issue.

It's that time of year again, the Highlands County Legislative Delegation will make a whistle stop here tomorrow.

Florida District 29 State Senator Erin Grall and District 83 Florida House Representative Kaylee Tuck will receive legislative requests from local dignitaries and address critical issues and work to advance Highlands County's priorities.

Both Grall and Tuck also may comment on local bills and other issues.

The session will be held in the board room of the Highlands County Government Center on S. Commerce Ave. in Sebring. The meeting will be held beginning at 9:30 in the Commissioners' Board room.

It appears that a plan to put a Sam's Club in on property off Bayview Street officially has fallen through.

Ten people were injured - two seriously - in a Polk County drive-by shooting yesterday

Lakeland Police Chief Sam Taylor says apparently four shooters opened fire from a dark blue, four-door Nissan with tinted windows and a temporary tag, then sped off.

Two victims reportedly are in critical condition, the other eight have injuries that are said to be not life-threatening. The victims are men between 20 and 35. No names have been released and no arrests have been announced.

There's no word on a motive, but Taylor believes the victims were targeted, and drugs may have been a factor.

Feb 1

It appears folks in Highlands County now are willing to plunk down a bigger down payment on a house. A new survey by Construction Coverage shows that the Avon Park-Sebring metro area showed a 33-percent increase in down payment amounts over 2019, while the national average showed only a 20-percent bump over the same time period.

Nevertheless, Highlands's down payments are dwarfed by the national average. While the median down payment here was set at \$40,000, the national average was set at \$60,000.

The Highlands County State Delegation will be here today to listen to citizens.

Florida District 29 State Senator Erin Grall and District 83 Florida House Representative Kaylee Tuck will receive legislative requests and address critical issues to work to advancing Highlands County's priorities.

The session will be held in the commissioner's board room of the Highlands County Government Center on S. Commerce Ave. in Sebring. The meeting will commence at 9:30.

A Sebring driver has been implicated in connection with a fatal traffic accident yesterday in Frostproof. Polk County sheriff's officials say 61-year-old Perry Jock was northbound on Highway 27 when he hit a Frostproof woman.

According to reports, 43-year-old Janice Barnett was on the east shoulder of the road just before sunrise yesterday when the accident occurred. Apparently, she was being picked up by a relative near the Camp Inn Resort, when she was struck by the pick-up.

The incident remains under investigation.

The cattle are on the loose again in Hardee County. This time it was a bull and a couple cows that were found roaming at large on Alderman Road outside of Fort Green. They have been impounded.

Owners are asked to call the Hardee County Sheriff's office.

Feb 2

You may have noticed increased air traffic over Highlands County the past few days. Officials at the Avon Park Bombing Range say they're hosting training exercises - and we can expect more today. The sessions will run from mid-morning until very late tonight. Noise levels are expected to be high.

Things are almost in readiness for tomorrow's opening of the Highlands County Fair. Highlands Radio Group Day will signal the opener, with the debut of the Reithoffer rides, the Nerveless Nocks Thrill Show, Scott's Magic Show and a Piano Juggler.

Friday also will be the first beauty pageant during the run of the fair, with the Junior Miss Highlands County competition to take to the stage at the Alan Jay Arena.

The gates will open at the Highlands County Fairgrounds tomorrow evening at 5pm.

There are rumblings that the "Super Sebring" format involving both the 12 Hours of Sebring and a 10-Hour World Endurance Championship sports car race may not last.

According to Reports, the FIA World Endurance Championship is evaluating a "rethink" of its joint race weekend with the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship 12-Hour classic at Sebring.

Principals say It's difficult for the sponsors and manufacturers to have two races on the same weekend and are looking for a solution.

The format was inaugurated in 2019.

It will be next year before the man accused in the Sebring SunTrust shooting incident will go to trial. The hearing will come to the courtroom in January of 2024.

Five tellers at the Sebring SunTrust South location were gunned down in an incident in January of 2019. Zephen Xaver has been implicated in the case. The Sebring man was apprehended shortly after the incident.

At a hearing yesterday, public defenders declined to raise an insanity defense, and asked for more time.

As many as a hundred private aircraft are expected to touch down at the Avon Park airport today, as the Old Fart's Flying Club comes to the City of Charm.

The group meets regularly at different airports to gather for lunch and fellowship. Today they will be dining at the Jacaranda Hotel.

According to reports, The Mosaic Company has sold its Streamsong Resort golf resort near Bowling Green in Hardee County for \$160 million. Apparently, it has been purchased by Lone Windmill LLC, a subsidiary of Kemper Sports Management.

Mosaic, the phosphate mining company, had converted a former mining site 10 years ago into three golf courses to develop Streamsong Resort as part of its reclamation process of former mines.

The phosphate giant owns some 380,000 acres in Hardee, Polk, Manatee and Hillsborough County.

Feb 3

They'll open the 86th edition of the Highlands County Fair this afternoon. It's Highlands Radio Group Day featuring the Nerveless Nocks Thrill Show, Scott's Magic Show and the Piano Juggler.

It'll also be the first of four beauty pageants with the Jr. Miss Highlands County competition on stage at the Alan Jay arena.

Over the course of the fair there will be livestock competitions, a number of different music groups, booths, exhibits and displays in addition to the Reithoffer Rides and plenty of good ol' fair food.

Gates open at 5pm at the Highlands County Fairgrounds.

One man was injured yesterday when a boat went out of control and wrecked on Lake Damon south of Avon Park. Officials of the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission say the 63-year-old man was taken to the hospital with what were described as "serious injuries."

Witnesses say the 16-foot Hoffman Racing Boat went out of control in the shallows area of the lake after what was described as a "speed run."

It remains unclear if they were part of the Buckshot Racing Tunnelboat team that was also at the lake. Good Samaritans reportedly ministered to the victim until First Responders arrived at the scene.

A hopeful for the Sebring city council is starting her campaign with a series of town hall meetings. Bobbie Smith-Powell will conduct a session on housing at the

Democrat Party Headquarters on the Sebring Parkway tomorrow morning at 11am.

In all, there will be a half dozen such sessions on topics ranging from Food Insecurity to Eldercare.

Smith-Powell is the local Democrat Party's State Committeewoman.

Officials at the Wauchula Police say a man wanted in connection with a local homicide case has been apprehended in Rutherford County, North Carolina. Reportedly, Matthew Scott Flories was taken into custody following a high speed chase.

The car he was in finally crashed in the city of Ellenboro.

Flores reportedly will be charged with second-degree murder for the killing of Jose Carlos Martinez. A second suspect - Stephanie Velgara - has also been arrested and is being charged as an accessory after the fact.

The case remains under investigation. Police officials say there still could be more arrests.

Feb 6

It was a busy weekend at the Highlands County fair, with the opening livestock competition and beauty pageants. Activities will continue today with a Pee Wee Show for large animals plus the Commercial Heiffer Show and Showmanship.

The Nerveless Nocks Thrill Show, the Piano Juggler and Scott's Magic Show also will have performances throughout the weekend. The fair runs through Saturday.

Highlands County has some new royalty. Four beauty pageants were held over the weekend. Emmy Bolin was crowned as Miss Highlands County for 2023 in proceedings Saturday night. Taking the tiara as Junior Miss Highlands County was Maura Wohl.

Carlyle Kenyon has been tapped as Teen Miss Highlands County, while Little Miss Highlands County for 2023 is Miss Kyleigh Lewis.

They will reign through the balance of the year.

The Market Swine Show was held yesterday at the Highlands County fair. Emma Mellow of Lorida Livestock showed the Grand Champion Market Swine. It's a Hampshire Cross weighing in at 243 pounds.

Reserve Grand Champion was shown by Bray See O'berry of the Boots & Buckles 4-H. He also walked away with Senior Showmanship honors.

A Sarasota man was killed Saturday in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol indicates a Toyota Rav4 piloted by the 63-year-old driver, went left of center on State Road 64, and ran head on into an oncoming GMC pickup.

The vehicles collided head-on. The Rav4 driver was dead at the scene. The driver of the pickup, a 32-year-old Port Charlotte man, was not hurt.

There could be a sad development in the case of a missing Palm Beach County man. The Okeechobee County Sheriff's Office says human remains were found Saturday morning during a search for Palm Beach Gardens' Gary Levin. The 74-year-old was driving for Lyft when he went missing after dropping off a passenger Monday. The body was found near the drop-off location. Levin's car was found

Thursday in North Carolina, and the driver was arrested for a murder in Hardee County.

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives are currently investigating a pair of unrelated shootings.

The first was reported at the BP station at the intersection of US 27 and SR 70 late Saturday night. There, deputies found 42-year-old Manuel Benitez Reyes Guzman in a vehicle with a gunshot wound to the head.

He was airlifted to a trauma center and was in critical condition at last report. Apparently the shooting happened after a verbal altercation.

A suspect is being sought

Yesterday, deputies were called to a home in the Highway Park area, south of Lake Placid. There they found 57-year-old Arthur Scurry Jr. Officials say he was discovered deceased after being shot multiple times.

A shooting last night also sent a local woman to the hospital. Sheriff's officials say the victim was hit by at least one bullet at a Lake Sebring Drive address. That incident also is under investigation.

Officials at the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission have announced a man injured in a boat crash on Lake Damon now has died. According to reports, it was 63-year-old Richard Young of Wisconsin that suffered fatal injuries when the craft went out of control and overturned in the lake near Avon Park.

Witnesses said speed may have been a contributing factor. The incident remains under investigation.

Feb 7

One man is being sought and another is in custody in connection with a couple of shootings in Highlands County over the weekend. Deputies still are looking for 25-year-old Shavartae Makel Deloach for the murder of 57-year-old Arthur Scurry Jr.

He was found Sunday shot to death in the Highway Park neighborhood south of Lake Placid.

Deloach is a black male, 5'6" tall, 130-pounds with brown hair and eyes. Authorities say he should be considered armed and dangerous.

A second suspect, 34-year-old Gary Ralph Jowers is in custody. He was captured by Hardee County Sheriff's deputies

Jowers is being held on attempted second-degree murder charges in a shooting that took place Sunday night on Lake Sebring Drive. The victim was hospitalized with serious injuries.

A suspect still is being sought in connection with the shooting of 42-year-old Manuel Benitez Reyes Guzman. He was found with a gunshot wound to the head in his vehicle at the BP Gas Station at US 27 and SR 70 Saturday night. He reportedly remains in critical condition.

Highlands County commissioners heard from a group of citizens from Fairmount Mobile Estates. They reportedly are unhappy about a residence that apparently has been overtaken by people who have let the property go. They allege there's no water, sewer or electric service at the home - and the people there are armed and have caused crime in the neighborhood.

Commissioners explained that the code enforcement effort has been cumbersome, and recommended purchasing the tax certificate on the property in an effort to foreclose.

The Highlands County Fair continues this evening with half price night. The Market Steer & Showmanship competition will take to the Livestock arena at 6:30.

Last night was the Commercial Heiffer and Showmanship competition. Grace Lynn Miller of the Lorida Livestock 4H Club showed the Grand Champion Heifer. The Reserve Grand Champion was shown by Tera Lyn Price of the Boots & Buckles 4H Club.

The fair runs through Saturday.

Avon Park has a new Executive Director for their Chamber of Commerce. Kamala Long has been selected to fill the slot left vacant with the departure of George Karos. Long most recently worked with the Heartland Cultural Alliance to stage a Fusion Fest in the City of Charm.

She's hit the ground running. Her first event for the Chamber will be the monthly luncheon.

Highlands County commissioners will get an end-of-year update from the tourist development council when they meet in regular session. Local efforts are expected to mirror statewide numbers in an increase in tourism - despite a couple of major storms.

In fact, Highlands may have benefitted from the weather, as costal residents fled inland to escape the storms.

Officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency have not yet revealed how many room nights they financed for those refugees.

Feb 8

Highlands County Sheriff's officials have the second of three shooting suspects in custody.

Joel Marroquin of Lake Placid has been arrested and charged with numerous counts including attempted second-degree murder, in connection with a shooting that took place last Saturday night.

Marroquin has been implicated in the shooting of 42-year-old Manuel Benitez Reyes Guzman. He was found shot in the head at the BP Gas station at US 27 and SR 70. At last report, he was listed in stable but guarded condition.

The 21-year-old Marroquin's bond was set at \$140,000.

Sherriff's officials still are looking for 25-year-old Shavartae Makel Deloach for the murder of 57-year-old Arthur Scurry Jr.

He was found Sunday shot to death in the Highway Park neighborhood south of Lake Placid.

Deloach is a black male, 5'6" tall, 130-pounds with brown hair and eyes. Authorities say he should be considered armed and dangerous.

The Highlands County Fair continues this evening with a half-price gate admission. Among the local events will be a a Pee Wee Show for small animals, as well as the poultry judging and showmanship.

At the Market Steer show last night, Hannah Sheffield from the Avon Park High FFA showed the Grand Champion while the Reserve Grand Champion Market Steer was presented by Rae Lynn Owens of the Lorida Livestock 4H Club. Reagan Richards walked off with Grand Senior Showmanship honors.

A rally for local non-profit organizations will be held today at the Jack Stroup Civic Center in Sebring. The exposition will feature many of the non-profit groups in the area that provide a wide range of services throughout Highlands County.

In addition to the booths and displays, there will be classes on CPR, Tai-Chi and backstage tours of the nearby Lakeside Theater.

The program will run today from 10am until 2pm

A safety change is coming after a Polk County teenager was struck and killed by a car.

Mayor Jack Hilligoss, says the city is working with Duke Energy to install a streetlight where Jadin Galindo was hit. Hilligoss says the city will also see if more lighting is needed at other bus stops.

The 13-year-old Jadin Galindo was waiting for the bus when the accident occurred. Police say it was dark and foggy in the alleyway where the McLaughlin Middle School eighth-grader was hit. No charges have been filed against the driver.

Highlands County commissioners yesterday heard from a group of citizens from Fairmount Mobile Estates. They reportedly are unhappy about a residence that apparently has been overtaken by people who have let the property go. They allege there's no water, sewer or electric service at the home - and the people there are armed and have caused crime in the neighborhood.

Commissioners explained that the code enforcement effort has been cumbersome, and recommended purchasing the tax certificate on the property in an effort to foreclose.

Feb 9

Hearing or seeing more jets in the area? Yes, officials from the Avon Park Air Force Range say they are training again today from late morning until midnight. Noise levels will be high.

They have declined to indicate what kind of aircraft are utilizing the facility or where they might be from.

It's a big day at the Highlands County Fair, as the Junior Livestock Auction winds up the agricultural portion of the annual exposition. All the goats, swine and cattle that have been shown over the past week now will go on the block for sale.

This will be an educational experience for the youngsters who have shown these animals, as they hope the selling price will exceed the amount of money, they have put into raising them.

For those who cannot afford to bid on or buy an animal, they can donate in the form of add-ons. That money goes to youngsters to help in their efforts.

The auction gets underway this evening at 6pm in the Junior Livestock Arena.

Highlands County officials say they are excited about yet more state dollars being funneled into the coffers here. The money comes from the Broadband Opportunity Grant Program. Local internet providers will be getting cash to bring the World Wide Web to what are termed "underserved locations" such as Venus.

Avon Park and Sebring also are in line for more than \$1.3 million dollars. That will be used to deploy fiber optic cable internet service to over 700 unserved households in those communities.

Florida Highway Patrol officials say there were no injuries yesterday afternoon when a sport utility vehicle rear-ended a school bus. According to reports, the bus was stopped on Lake Francis Road at the intersection of Highway 27 when the accident occurred.

Neither of the drivers, nor the four elementary school children aboard the bus were injured.

Feb 10

A Sebring man reportedly was killed yesterday morning in a Hardee County traffic accident. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 64-year-old was riding his motorcycle west on State Road 66 near Crewsville Road when the accident occurred.

Apparently, he was in a no passing zone when the biker pulled his cycle out to overtake a pickup, which made a left turn. The cycle hit the side of the truck.

The motorcyclist was airlifted to Lakeland Regional Hospital where he was pronounced dead. No charges have been filed.

The Highlands County Fair will end up with a bang this evening with a Friday night concert. The Shannon Reed band will take to the Budweiser Hospitality Tent for music from 6-9.

Tomorrow evening the Zinc & Copper Youth Jazz Ensemble will close out the 86th running of the fair. No attendance numbers are yet available, but good weather is expected to bump up the totals for this year's crowd.

A Sebring city council candidate will be holding yet another town hall-style meeting tomorrow in an effort to find the opinion of voters in the City on the Circle. This time, Dr Bobbie Smith-Powell will address the issue of Food Insecurity.

The session will be held tomorrow morning at 11am in the Democrat Party Headquarters at 4216 Sebring Parkway.

It may be a while before the city of Lake Wales and developers go to court over the progress on refurbishing the historic Walesbuilt Hotel. The city and the Lake Wales Community Redevelopment agency have filed suit against the firm - Walesbuilt LLC, saying they obtained the title to the property by deceit.

Developers have pointed to the work accomplished at that location and have filed for a jury trial in the matter - pushing the court date now back to September.

Feb 13

Three people were killed Saturday in a two vehicle accident west of Sebring. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a sport utility vehicle carrying a couple of elderly Sebring residents was attempting to make a left turn from Highway 27 into the Tanglewood community, when they were hit broadside by a motorcycle.

Troopers say the 31-year-old Avon Park man was riding at a high rate of speed when his cycle hit the car. Both he, and both occupants of the vehicle were killed.

A fire yesterday in Hardee County claimed a life. Units were called to the house on the Old Dixie Highway shortly before 4: AM where they found the structure fully involved in flames.

Two adults were treated at the scene. A juvenile was taken to the hospital. After the fire was extinguished, firefighters found the remains of 63-year-old Martin De La Rosa inside the house.

The state fire marshal's office has been called in to determine the cause of the blaze.

Avon Park city council members will gather for their first meeting in February this evening. Among other things, they'll look at a new lease for the Avon Park Historical Society. The group has announced plans to build a baseball museum next to their current location.

In other action the council will be asked about lighting at Alina McWhite Park, and will asked to donate a scholarship to the Miss Avon Park pageant.

Officials at Duke Energy have announced their crews have installed a light pole in Lake Wales at Dr. J.A. Wiltshire Ave and Miami Street. That's where 13-year-old Jadin Galindo was hit by a pickup truck.

Authorities say it was dark and foggy when the accident occurred, and the driver was not charged. The Lake Wales student apparently had been waiting for the school bus when he was struck and killed.

Feb 14

Increased lighting may be coming to Aline McWhite Park in the City of Charm. Residents of the city's Southside came before the Avon Park city council to ask for the additional illumination, saying there had been seven shootings in the area off Fred Connor Street - with four of them being fatal.

They also asked that the city put up surveillance cameras to help monitor activity there. They noted that a nearby church already had taken such action.

Mayor Garrett Anderson reported that all the lights in the area currently are working, but assured the citizens the city would contact Duke Energy to see what could be done.

Feb 15

There won't be much use of the Avon Park Civic Center for a while. It appears the place is riddled with termites. The Main Street building, which once was an NCNB Bank, hasn't been tented in years - and may never have been treated.

That's all about to change. But city council members found out it's going to cost more than previously anticipated.

Although the first floor has been shut down, the Peter Paul Museum of the Arts on the second floor remains open - at least until the tenting procedure takes place. There's no word on when that will occur.

Motorists - be advised - CSX Railroad is planning to do some work on the crossing in Lorida today. That means U.S. 98 at Bluff Hammock Road and Cowhouse Road will be shut down through tomorrow.

Drivers will have to use Bluff Hammock Road get around. The crossing is expected to be closed through Thursday morning.

A teenager is hurt after she was hit by a truck in Polk County. It happened yesterday morning at CR 547 and Sophie Lane while the girl was walking to Davenport High School. The sheriff's office says the 15-year-old was in a crosswalk when she was hit by a box truck. She was taken to the hospital and is in critical but stable condition. No charges have been announced, but an investigation is underway. Sheriff Grady Judd says the driver was going below the speed limit, and the lights at the crosswalk were not scheduled to go on for another 45 minutes.

Feb 16

Avon Park city council members have agreed to work on a lease with the Avon Park Historical Society for a building they use on Museum Avenue. But it won't be for quite as long as had been requested.

Council members instructed city attorney Gerald Buhr to work on 21-year agreement - less than half the 50-year pact that Historical Society officials wanted. Council members agreed that two decades is about as long as they want to go before review.

Historical Society officials are beginning a fund raising drive to get money to build a baseball museum adjacent to the current depot museum in the City of Charm. They say they need the long term agreement to apply for grants.

Residents in the northern part of Highlands County reported smoke hanging in the air yesterday. Officials of the Highlands County Sheriff's office attributed the

conditions to the more than 400 acres of controlled burns that were being conducted.

It was unclear about the level of the local smoke dispersion index for the area yesterday.

A concerned parent came before Highlands County school board members this week, expressing concerns about a Lake Placid school teacher, who was sporting a "mermaid makeover" complete with makeup during class. Jesse Sapp noted the same educator had worn a dress in the past. After asking the school's principal about the issue, He said he was told the principal had worn a tutu around the school previously.

Sapp called on school board members to codify measures against the process, saying that dressing in drag was not appropriate.

A subsequent speaker, noted that teachers are role models and such garb could be confusing to students.

Board members had no immediate comment.

Two Polk County men are facing charges for a mass shooting in Lakeland. Federal prosecutors announced yesterday that two men from Lakeland have been indicted for last month's drive-by shooting that hurt eleven people. Two victims are still in the hospital. Thirty-two-year-old Nicholas Hanson and 22-year-old Marcus Mobley, Jr. are facing charges that include possession of ammunition by a convicted felon. A 15-year-old boy had already been arrested, and two other suspects remain at large.

Feb 17

It hardly seems possible, but it's been three years since Marc Schrader was hired as the city manager of Avon Park. Well it has, and his contract now is up for renegotiation.

City council members have ordered city attorney Gerald Buhr to come up with a tentative contract. Schrader already has said he wants more money and health care coverage.

Council members were urged to get with the city manager for one-on-one meetings before their planned public negotiation session.

Controversy erupted at the Highlands County School Board session over a proposal to send a number of administrators to Chicago for a College Board conference on African American Studies.

Board member Reece Martin pointed to actions by Governor Ron Desantis surrounding the issue, saying that it could at best be a moot subject.

Board Chair Donna Howerton noted that while there were some things that did not meet the Sunshine State Standards, there were some usable courses.

School board member Nicole Rodonski called some of the topics "divisive."

Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Programs Danielle Erwin accused detractors of "cherry picking" topics on the agenda.

Board member Isaac Durrance asked for a list of conferences that would be attended - but drew fire from a teacher in attendance at the board meeting for asking for such documentation.

In the end, the board approved the trip by a 3-2 margin with Martin and Radonski dissenting.

Speed is suspected in a deadly motorcycle crash in Polk County. The crash happened Wednesday night near Lake Wales on US 27. The sheriff's office says the 28-year-old motorcyclist was speeding and passing other drivers when they rear-ended another driver. That driver was gone by the time deputies got to the scene.

Feb 20

Saturday they saddled up, Wednesday they'll be here. The 2023 Cracker Trail Ride is underway. The 120 mile trek is in its 35th year, with about 120 riders and waggoneers making their way from Bradenton across central Florida to Fort Pierce.

It's the annual tribute to Florida cowmen - who used to drive cattle along the route to market.

The Half-Way mark is at Highway 27, where the riders make their ceremonial crossing carrying American flags. That will happen about noon Wednesday.

The procession currently is making its way through Hardee County.

One person was killed and another seriously injured in a 2-car accident yesterday near the Bear's Den at Highway 27 and State Road 70.

Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a vehicle driven by a 41-year-old Lake Placid woman was traveling north in the southbound lane of Highway 27 and ran head-on into a car driven by an Immokalee man.

A passenger in her car - a 69-year-old Sebring man was killed, and a passenger in the second vehicle, a 30-year-old Immokalee man, was seriously injured.

The incident remains under investigation.

Two people were killed Friday in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol troopers say a 52-year-old Fort Lauderdale man was driving west on State Road 66 near Skipper Road when his Toyota

Corrola went left of center and slammed into an oncoming car.

The Fort Lauderdale man was killed, as was a passenger in the second vehicle, a 46-year-old Wauchula woman. The driver of the second car, a 47-year-old Wauchula man was taken to the hospital in critical condition.

The incident remains under investigation.

Feb 21

Drivers in Highlands County beware, it's foggy out there this morning - especially in Sebring and Avon Park. Motorists are advised to leave a bit early, use your low beams and allow a bit of extra time to get where you're going.

Highlands County commissioners will take care of a wide variety of business when they meet in regular session this morning. More agricultural land will disappear in favor of a housing designation as commissioners consider a seven acre parcel in the Fish Hawk Reserve off Lake Mirror for a low density residential project.

In other action, commissioners will look at changing the definition of a county park, to include a municipal benefit taxing unit and will mull over the purchase Express Vote machines for Supervisor of Elections Karen Healy's office.

After a nearly hour long discussion, Highlands County Commissioners took no action on a request related to environmental clearance requirements in the Carter Creek area.

A number of environmental concerns came forward in support of the action - however, landowners in the area pleaded with commissioners, saying that it was destroying their property rights and making their land virtually worthless.

Commissioner Kevin Roberts suggested the county research finding funds to purchase the properties at market value.

It will be a short-handed school board meeting this evening with two of the five board members expected to be absent. Both members Jan Shoop and Reece Martin reportedly will not be in attendance.

Nevertheless, the quorum will be asked to make the "Relationships Under Construction" materials available to the public. It's the curriculum that is being looked at as the sex education portion of students' comprehensive health education.

They also expect to hear citizen input on a vote to send administrators to a controversial conference in Chicago.

Units from Lake Placid and Desoto City were called to a Holiday Park Drive address yesterday afternoon to extinguish a recreational vehicle fire. The blaze started around 3:00 yesterday. It consumed a motor home and burned three cars before they got it out

No injuries were reported. Crews kept it from spreading to two additional motor homes and several other vehicles in the area.

Feb 22

A lot of horsepower is coming to Highlands County starting today. First, the Cracker Trail Riders are slated to cross Highway 27 at the interchange of US 98 and State Road 66. That's scheduled for about noon.

The crossing by more than 100 riders and waggoneers marks the halfway point in their annual cross-state trek. The ride commemorates historic Florida cowmen driving their cattle to market.

Meanwhile, cars and drivers for the Sports Car Vintage Racing Association begin loading in for this weekend's event at the Sebring International Raceway. In addition to vintage and historic sports and stock cars, the International GT and Trans-Am series will open their seasons here.

Cars will take to the track beginning tomorrow.

For the next 20 days, citizens will have an opportunity to review materials slated to be used in the sex education portion of Highlands County School's comprehensive health education program.

The goals & objectives, PowerPoints and student worksheets in the Relationships Under Construction program will be available online at Relationships Under Construction dot com.

Following the review time, the matter will come before the school board to be considered for final approval.

It looks like supervisor of Elections Karen Healy will be getting some new machines. Highlands County commissioners yesterday approved the purchase Express Voting devices for her office.

In other action, they agreed with changing the definition of a county park to include a municipal benefit taxing unit and approved a zoning change for seven acres of property off Lake Mirror. That will allow for a low density residential project at the Fish Hawk Reserve.

Four teenagers are accused of breaking into over a dozen cars in Polk County. The sheriff's office announced yesterday four 17-year-olds were arrested Monday in Bartow for burglaries at three apartment complexes in Lakeland and

Mulberry. One victim says a gun was stolen. Deputies say all the cars involved were unlocked. Three of the teens are from Tampa, and one is from Bartow. All are facing charges that include grand theft of a motor vehicle and grand theft of a firearm.

Feb 23

The Cracker Trail Riders have passed their half-way point and are headed out of Highlands County. They arrived here Tuesday afternoon and made the annual crossing of Highway 27 about noon yesterday.

The group spent the night in Lorida and will be saddling up now headed to Okechobee. Plans are for them to spend the night in beautiful Bassinger.

The ride commemorates Florida cowmen driving their cattle to market. It will finish Saturday in Fort Pierce.

Cars and drivers in town for this year's Sports Car Vintage Racing SpeedTour will get their first official taste of the Sebring International Raceway beginning this morning.

Groups will start test and tune sessions beginning at 8AM with sessions to run through 2: PM. That will include competitors in the International GT and Trans-Am races.

Practice and qualifying starts tomorrow.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials have arrested a convicted drug dealer in connection with a 2018 murder. Miguel Angel Molina-Etchechury faces first

degree murder charges in connection with the beating death of 22-year-old Jonathan Diaz.

Described as a "local drug kingpin," Molina-Etchechury recently was sentenced to 11-years in prison on federal drug charges.

Authorities believe Diaz was slain due to a drug debt.

Avon Park city council members will get together for a special meeting tonight. They'll again meet with members of Florida Airport Management and municipal consultants to determine progress a pending Federal Aviation Administration Airport Investment Partnership Program grant.

The city has been working on the grant for better than a year now. The AIPP program reportedly is designed to let airports explore privatization as a means to generate access to sources of private capital. Florida Airport Management wants to take over operations of the Avon Park airport facility.

Seven Highlands County Students are slated to be recognized this evening at the Champion For Children Youth Awards. The honorarium, noting service to others, is modeled after the Champion For Children/Judge Clifton M. Kelley Award for adults.

23 Nominees have been whittled down to seven finalists. This year's winner will receive an all-expenses paid theme park trip. The ceremonies will be held this evening at the First Sebring Church.

It looks like supervisor of Elections Karen Healy will be getting some new machines. Highlands County commissioners have approved the purchase Express Voting devices for her office.

In other action, they agreed with changing the definition of a county park to include a municipal benefit taxing unit and approved a zoning change for seven

acres of property off Lake Mirror. That will allow for a low density residential project at the Fish Hawk Reserve.

Feb 24

Action picks up in earnest at the Sebring International Raceway today as practice and qualifying sessions begin for the Sports Car Vintage Racing Association's SpeedTour event.

All groups, including the International GT and Trans-Am series will be setting the grids for this weekends' races. The event runs through Sunday.

Highlands County parent Jesse Sapp is warning other parents that videos on Social Emotional Learning that have not been reviewed or approved by Highlands County School Board members - are being shown to local middle school students.

Sapp said that he personally was "very upset" with what his eighth grader had taken away from the session.

After speaking at this week's school board meeting, Sapp said he was admonished by the Lake Placid Middle School principal for "spreading inaccuracies." He reportedly corrected Sapp by saying only two videos had been shown, and not three videos as the parent had alleged.

In the meantime, Sapp says he is attempting to contact the district office to learn more about the local S-E-L curriculum.

And the winner of the Champion for Children 2023 Youth Award is Carlyn Bobo. The Lake Placid High School senior was crowned last night in ceremonies at the First Sebring Church.

Bobo is a member of the Green Dragon cross country & track team, and a Highlands County Sheriff's Office Explorer. She's described as a hard worker who puts others before herself.

In all, 23 students had been nominated, that was whittled down to seven finalists last night. The honorarium, noting service to others, is modeled after the Champion for Children/Judge Clifton M. Kelley Award for adults.

The Sebring area golf course where a giant alligator was spotted now has been identified as Spring Lake. The photo of the massive gator, estimated at 12-14 feet, went viral on the internet - comparing the course to "Jurassic Park."

Seeing alligators at golf courses is fairly common in Florida - it was the size of this one that drew attention.

Apparently it came and went without incident.

Sebring city council candidate Bobbie Smith Powell will continue her series of town hall meetings tomorrow with a session on healthcare. It's the third of a half dozen such meetings.

It will be held at 11:00 tomorrow morning at the Highlands County Democrat Party Headquarters on the Sebring Parkway

The Polk County Sheriff's Office is mourning the loss of one of their own. Detention Deputy Drake Perry died after an off-duty crash in Lake County. It happened in the community Groveland.

The 22-year-old Perry had been with the sheriff's office a few months, working at the South County Jail in Frostproof.

Sheriff Grady Judd hailed Perry as an outstanding cadet in the academy and a natural-born leader.

A judge has ordered a mental evaluation at the request of the attorney for a man who was arrested in North Carolina while driving the car of a dead Lyft driver from South Florida and who is also charged with murder in a separate case in Hardee County.

The order came as Florida officials worked to extradite 35-year-old Matthew Scott Flores, who is a person of interest in the death of Lyft driver Gary Levin.

Flores appeared in court for a probable cause hearing in Rutherford County, where he was arrested after a vehicle pursuit in multiple counties and charged with a parole violation, being a fugitive, felony speeding to elude arrest, and driving while impaired. His attorney requested the evaluation, and the judge granted it.

In Hardee County, Flores has also been charged with first-degree murder, grand theft auto, and possession of a firearm by a felon, and tampering with evidence in the fatal Jan. 24 shooting of Jose Carlos Martinez, 43, in Wauchula.

FEB 27

Cars were on track last weekend for the Sports Car Vintage Racing Association's SpeedTour, but already fans are lining up for this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

Officials at the Sebring International Raceway say that vans and motorhomes already have started to line up in the parking area across from Gate 4 in anticipation of the 2023 edition of the Oldest Sports Car Endurance race in North America.

In fact, the track had a trio of pace car appearances over the weekend in the area, with another slated for next weekend. There, they have the new pace car on display and are giving out event posters.

Avon Park city council members will be mulling over their contract with City Manager Marc Schrader when they meet in regular session this evening. At their last meeting, Schrader announced this is the end of his current three year pact, and is ready to renegotiate.

In other action, the council will again look at their lease with the Avon Park Historical Society for the train depot on Museum Avenue. Meanwhile, the society has started a fundraising drive to add a baseball museum as an annex to their current location.

Highlands County safety services were busy over the weekend. They first responded to an RV fire. Avon Park Lakes firefighters were called to the Taunton Road address, but the motorhome was completely destroyed - as was a nearby car. No injuries were reported, the cause remains under investigation.

Later, Desoto City firefighters were called to the Sebring Regional Airport, when a single-engine plane made a hard landing. One person suffered minor injuries when the Globe Swift GC-18 apparently put down without landing gear.

The National Transportation Safety Board will investigate that one.

One person was killed and another seriously injured in a Lake Wales traffic accident. According to police in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge, a Chevrolet Camaro was southbound at a high rate of speed, and slammed into the back of a pickup.

The car flipped several times, ejecting both occupants. Dead is 38-year-old Eliecer Padilla, a second occupant, Jeanette Gonzalex was airlifted to Lakeland Regional in serious condition.

A search is underway to find the driver who killed a woman in a hit-and-run in Polk County. That one happened Saturday night in Lakeland on West 10th Street. Lakeland Police say a female pedestrian was found lying unresponsive in the street. The 37-year-old died at the scene. Investigators are looking for a silver car with front-end damage and maybe a dent on its right rear bumper.

FEB 28

Dense fog once again is shrouding Highlands County. Motorists are urged to use their low beams and not to overdrive their headlights.

Highlands County School Transportation officials say the busses will be running as usual - however, they will pull over if conditions get too bad.

It appears Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader will stay on for at least another three years. After a very public, and sometimes tense negotiation session at last night's Avon Park city council meeting, the two sides hammered out the details of the city manager's contract.

It will bring Schrader to an average \$130,000 a year, provide him with a vehicle, with health insurance and other considerations. Incidentally, the vehicle will be a 10-year-old Durango already in the municipal motor pool.

All council members had words of praise for the job Shrader has done over the past three years.

An illegal burn that got out of hand, brought units from the Venus, Sun 'N Lake South, Lake Placid and Placid Lakes stations out to extinguish a 20-acre brush fire near Venus yesterday afternoon. According to reports, the flames did get close to a structure, but crews were able to stop the advance before it did significant damage to the home.

No injuries were reported. No cause has been listed. Authorities say there may be lingering smoke in the area of County Road 721.

Those who want to learn more about law enforcement in Highlands County will have an opportunity this evening as Sheriff Paul Blackman addresses the Highlands Tea Party. Sheriff Blackman is expected to give an overview of the office, its staff and operation. He also will be asked about the upcoming budget for the Sheriff's office during the next fiscal year.

The session will be held at the Vietnam Veterans Hall, 33565 Grand Prix Drive - behind the Sebring Walmart. Doors open at 5pm meeting begins at 6pm.

A Manatee County deputy is making sure a fallen Polk County deputy isn't forgotten. The Police Unity Tour is a 300-mile, three-day bike ride from Norfolk, Virginia to Washington, DC that'll take place in May. Manatee County Deputy James Racky announced this month that he'll be riding for Polk County Deputy Blane Lane. The 21-year-old Lane was killed in an on-duty shooting in

October. Blane's mom tells News Channel 8 she's honored by Racky's gesture because she's so scared her son is going to be forgotten, and this is a way to make sure his memory continues to live on.

March 1

For the third day in a row, dense fog is blanketing Highlands County. The Highlands County Sheriff's office has issued an advisory that indicates conditions are expected to continue until at least 9:00 this morning.

Motorists are advised to leave a bit early and allow extra time to reach their destination - use their low beams and not overdrive their headlights.

Highlands County school transportation officials say the busses are running, but might be a bit late due to visibility conditions.

There was quite a discussion at the Avon Park city council meeting about the installation of a couple of lights on Fred Connor Street. The action comes at the request of neighbors, who said there have been seven shootings at the basketball courts there - four of them have been fatal.

There was a dust-up between councilwoman Bernice Taylor, who maintained it was the city's job to test lights, and other members of council, who called on citizens to report locations and pole numbers of broken street lights to Duke Energy who provide repair and replacement services.

Mayor Garret Anderson admonished citizens to say something if they see lights that are not operable.

Highlands County Sheriff Paul Blackman says he'd like to have a dedicated traffic enforcement unit as part of his operation. Blackman discussed the issue last night at the Highlands County Tea Party meeting. He said that while his deputies now do some speed enforcement, he would like to develop a unit solely devoted to traffic patrols.

The plan reportedly will be part of budget discussions for the upcoming 2023-24 fiscal year when Highlands County commissioners discuss their planned outlays for county departments and constitutional officers.

Lake Wales police have recovered nearly a half million dollars in stolen motorsports good in a Miami Street raid. Recovered were two Ford Cobra jet drag race cars, a Polaris ATV, a couple boats including a 23-foot Skeeter, as well as a pair of trailers.

One, a Haulmark Hauler they found, reportedly had been taken from Lake Placid.

Authorities say the entire cache was valued at about \$400,000. Arrested was 51-year-old Billy Joe Byrd. He was booked into the Polk County jail on numerous counts. Police say more arrests are expected.

March 2

When it comes to affordable housing - a new survey shows that the Avon Park/Sebring metro area is in line with national averages. The new report by Construction Coverage - looking at the US locations investing the most in affordable housing, shows Highlands County construction comes in at an average of \$230,000 per home.

That's just a shade above the national average of \$226,000 per unit. The survey also shows that the average cost of a new home here is about \$395,000. The data used for the analysis comes from the US Census Bureau and Zillow.

The new Miss Avon Park pageant will be getting a shot in the arm from the city. Now branded the Miss Avon Park City of Charm Scholarship Pageant, council members voted by a 4-1 margin to donate a \$500 scholarship to the winner. Organizer Kerri Bryant told the council she now has taken the reigns of the competition again, and it is being underwritten by Heartland Helping Hands.

She told the council the winner would have to serve a year before receiving the check - which would be written to a school. Councilwoman Bernice Taylor voted against the action, after being dissatisfied with some of the answers.

Preparations are underway for this year's Super Sebring and officials at the Sebring International Raceway have announced that in addition to The Mobil 1 12 Hours of Sebring, the W-E-C and Michelin Cup races, there will be a slate of live music on the midway.

Scheduled for concerts are Hard Candy, Rock Town, Covered in Black, and Love Pit. Friday night will feature recording artists Corey Smith, Rachel Messer & Connor Dale. Smith was featured on Season 15 of The Voice as part of Team Blake Shelton.

It soon may be easier to find your way around South Florida State College. School officials say they have re-named the access roads at the behest of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office.

Some of the street names include Enlightenment Circle, Integrity Street, Community Court, and Excellence Avenue. School officials say eventually, GPS systems will be enabled to direct individuals to precise building locations.

March 3

Sebring city council candidate Bobbie Smith-Powell will be holding the fifth in her series of town hall-style meetings tomorrow. At issue there will be the topic of elder care.

The session will start at 11:00 tomorrow morning in the Highlands County Democrat Party Headquarters on the Sebring Parkway.

A teenager is charged with murder in Polk County. Sheriff Grady Judd announced yesterday that Lakeland's La'Darion Chandler was charged Tuesday for a deadly shooting in December. The 19-year-old allegedly shot and killed a 33-year-old Lakeland man in the Secret Cove subdivision. Investigators believe the two were in rival gangs.

March 6

Highlands County firefighters are back out at the Highlands County landfill battling another blaze there. At last report, it was estimated at 5-acres. Units from Desoto City and West Sebring are back out again trying to contain the stinky blaze.

There's been no progress update, but units say they plan to be out there "all day." Overnight, landfill employees continued to monitor the situation and spray water on it.

Earlier this weekend, Desoto City, Leisure Lakes and the Florida Forest Service crews were called to contain a brush fire off Canter Path. That one charred about 2.5 acres before they got it contained.

No injuries were reported and no cause has been determined in either incident.

Highlands County's movie-going options just got smaller. Without fanfare, the B&B Theaters have closed their doors. No reason was announced for the closure of the multi-plex. It was the second time in the past years the theaters in the Fairmount Square shopping complex had been rumored to be shut down.

Speed is suspected in a deadly crash in Polk County. It happened Saturday night in Lakeland on SR 33 North. Officials of the Polk County Sheriff's Office say Lakeland's David Paul was speeding when he lost control of his motorcycle and slid into the path of a car. The 45-year-old died at the scene.

March 8

A joint meeting with Avon park city officials and the Florida Department of Transportation set for today has been postponed. Reportedly there were problems with notifications so it has been put off until later this month.

The meeting was scheduled to take public input on a plan to change the parking and traffic patterns on Main Street through the downtown area.

The Highlands County landfill is back up and running again. It was shut down after a Sunday fire that charred more than 5-acres before it was brought under control.

County fire officials believe it may have been started by an errant battery - perhaps a lithium battery - which are particularly difficult to extinguish. Authorities are calling on residents not to dispose of such batteries in their trash, but rather to wait for e-waste collections.

Highlands County commissioners yesterday voted to spend \$1.3 million dollars for a new landfill compactor and hydraulic cover spray unit for the solid waste department.

Although the action comes in the wake of the latest fire at the Highlands County landfill, officials reported the item had been on the agenda for several months. The new machine apparently does a better job with more fuel efficiency than current equipment.

In light of the fire, Highlands County Commissioner Scott Kirouac called for the installation of cameras on the pile to monitor conditions there and spot fires at an early stage.

Highlands County Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore started her portion of last night's school board meeting by calling on Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services Melissa Blackman to explain so-called "Resiliency" videos that have been shown to local middle schoolers.

The explanation did not mollify parent Jesse Sapp, who referred to the explanation as "ramblings" and "excuses." He also questioned if there had been sunshine law violations if a curriculum committee had voted on them without proper public notification.

Blackman said some of the videos now have been posted for parental review.

Four people are dead after two planes collided in mid-air in Polk County. It happened yesterday afternoon in Winter Haven over Lake Hartridge. One of those killed was Winter Haven 19-year-old Zachary Mace. He was a student at Polk State College. Winter Haven 24-year-old Faith Baker was also killed. The sheriff's office says Baker was a pilot and flight instructor at Sunrise Aviation in Ormond Beach. A third victim was identified as a 67-year-old man from Pennsylvania. The fourth victim has not been identified. Mace and Baker were in one plane. The other two were in the other plane. No one else was involved. The FAA and NTSB are investigating.

March 9

It's that time of year again, things have dried out and the chance of wildfires has increased significantly. State Road 62 was closed between Polk Rd and US HWY 17 in Hardee County yesterday as units there had to extinguish a large, smoky brush fire.

Local officials warn motorists to be cautious driving through or parking in dry grass that could ignite due to hot automotive parts. Also, keep any combustibles - such as cigarettes and ashes - inside the vehicle.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say a couple of local residents recently got taken in the so-called grandparent scam. The victims were told that their grandkids were in jail and needed bond money.

One caller claimed to be an attorney, the other a bondsmen. Both victims got the cash, which was then picked up by a third person.

It was only after the cash was gone that the victims called family members and learned the grandchild was not in jail.

Authorities remind residents, if you get a call like this, ask for details, then check with family members first to determine if your relative is even in the place where the callers claim.

And never give out personal information or cash based on a phone call.

March 10

Highlands County is one of the top five locations in Florida where social security goes the farthest. At least that's what a new report from SmartAsset has found.

Highlands ranks number five in the Sunshine State for the ability to stretch Social Security payments. Survey officials say they looked at the average Social Security income for residents in each Florida County. They then calculated how far it would go cover the basic necessities, such as food, housing and transportation.

Sumter, Baker, St. Johns and Indian River counties were the top four on the Florida list.

Early voting ends today for the Sebring municipal election and the turnout has been, well, puny. Of the 6,542 registered voters in the City on the Circle- so far only 317 have cast their ballots.

That's 4.85-percent of the electorate.

Five candidates are in the running for three seats. Hopefuls include incumbents Tom Dettman and Lenard Carlisle as well as challengers Harrison Havery, Bobbie Smith-Powell and Josh Stewart.

Election day will be next Tuesday.

Cars, trucks, vans and motorhomes continue to pile in to the pre-race staging area at the Sebring International Raceway in anticipation of this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

Loading in of Motorhomes with reserved parking spaces and all proper credentials will be allowed in this weekend. Gates will open to the fans on Tuesday.

Track officials remind those coming to this year's race NO tickets will be sold at the front gate. To speed the entry process, Gate One will be only for those with tickets. Those wishing to purchase tickets will be directed to Gate 3 to purchase their passes.

The Sebring International Raceway is the home of firsts. For the first time, members of the Hypercar class of racers will be on track as part of this year's World Endurance Championship Prologue at the raceway. Cars from Cadillac, Ferrari, Glickenhaus, Peugeot, Toyota and Vanwall will share the 3.72 mile course.

Sessions are set for morning and afternoon sessions Saturday and Sunday at the Sebring International Raceway. They will be in competition next Friday as the WEC 1000 takes to the track at Sebring.

A Frostproof man was killed yesterday in a traffic accident just outside the Friendly City. Polk County Sheriff's officials say 51-year-old David LeBlanc was northbound on Highway 27, when his Chevy van slammed into the back of a semi tractor-trailer rig that had slowed to turn into a business just north of the Highway 98 intersection.

No charges have been filed.

Some details are out on a deadly plane crash in Polk County. Four people were killed when two planes collided, mid-air, in Winter Haven over Lake Hartridge on

Tuesday. An NTSB investigator said yesterday the planes hit nose-to-nose even though each pilot made moves to avoid the collision. The investigator also says one pilot communicated their location, but it's not clear if the other pilot heard it. Neither plane had radar or any kind of avoidance system. Also, both planes have been pulled from the lake, but one plane is missing a wing.

March 13

The Sebring Walmart was shut down early this morning due to a small fire. Sebring police say it occurred in the freezer section of the grocery department before 6am.

Units from the Sebring police and fire departments responded. The store was evacuated without incident. No injuries were reported - cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Race week excitement continues today as the Fifth Annual 12 Hour Fan fest comes to downtown Sebring. In addition to driver interviews, live music and an autograph session, transporters hauling racers set to compete in Saturday's 71st Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring will parade through downtown.

Leading the event will be WWOJ's own Donnie Shaffer in the Pfaff Motorsports hauler, with live reports.

This past weekend was the World Endurance Championship Prologue. It was the first time this year WEC cars had a chance to run the Sebring International Raceway.

It has been known for decades that the Sebring International Raceway has a profound impact on the local economy during the month of March. However, a new report due out tomorrow reportedly will look at the revenue the raceway generates in Highlands County over the course of the entire year.

The track reportedly is in operation more than 300 days out of the year for practice sessions, instructional courses and ticketed events. Earlier this year, SIR officials indicated there are 14 ticketed events to be held at the track during 2023.

Sad racing news out of Avon Park. Officials from the lawnmower racing group NASGRASS say it has become impossible for them to continue racing at the Avon Park airport facility known as the Mowerplex. The group cites hurdles thrown at them by the city of Avon Park as the reason.

They now have announced that they will build a for-purpose lawnmower racing facility at the Florida Flywheelers Park. So far, there's no word on when that might be constructed and open for their first race.

The Avon Park city council will meet in regular session this evening. They'll take a look at the possible redesign of Fred Connor Street, where a number of fatal shootings have occurred.

They'll also hear a request to reduce a lien, built up due to code enforcement infractions.

An incident in Polk County should be a warning for those selling items online. The Polk County sheriff's office shared details yesterday of a robbery that took place last month in Lakeland. A man named Melik saw a 2009 Toyota Prius for sale online and contacted the seller. Melik showed up at the seller's house, and the two went for a test drive. After returning to the seller's home, the seller went inside to get some paperwork, but when he came back outside, Melik and the car were gone. The man called the sheriff's office, and deputies, in a matter

of minutes, found Melik in the car just eight miles away and arrested him. The sheriff's office says meet-ups with strangers for sales can be risky, and they should take place in public locations and never alone.

March 14

Although tomorrow is the first day for track activity at the Sebring International Raceway, due to the crush of fans. Officials say they will open the grounds this afternoon. That will give some of the faithful a chance to set up their tents and trailers for Race Week.

Some motor homes with reserve trackside spaces were let in this past weekend during the World Endurance Championship Prologue.

Raceway officials remind race goers that there will be no ticket sales at the front gate this year - all tickets must be purchased at Gate 3.

How much money do you think the Sebring International Raceway generates for Highlands County over the course of the year? If you said over \$600 million, you'd be right. A new report issued by the Florida State University Center for Economic Forecasting and Analysis recently issued the study.

Among other things, it points to the more than 300 days of activities at the track, which involve races by various sanctioning bodies, team practice sessions and instructional weekends.

The \$600 million includes direct & indirect wages, taxes, and other factors.

Today is Election Day in the city of Sebring. Five hopefuls are in the running for three seats on the council in the City on the Circle. In early voting, only 357 residents have cast their ballots - just over five percent of the electorate turned out.

Incumbents Lenard Carlisle and Tom Dettman are facing challengers Harrison Havery, Bobbie Smit-Powell and Josh Stewart. Polls will be open in Sebring from 7am until 7pm.

Sebring Police continue to look for clues in connection with the shooting death of a Sebring 17-year-old. Authorities say he was killed while riding his bicycle along Grand Avenue in the Washington Heights Community.

They say it appears that the victim may have been on his way home after playing basketball at the nearby Bountiful Blessing Church when the incident occurred.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Sebring police Department.

Officials at NASGRASS have made it official, telling the City of Avon Park they are pulling out of the property they have occupied at the municipal airport there for decades.

Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader notified the council at their meeting last night. NASGRASS officials made the announcement this past weekend, saying the hurdles thrown at them by the city of Avon Park made it impossible to continue to race on the former landfill at the airport.

March 15

They began letting fans set up at the Sebring International Raceway yesterday in preparation for this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

Today action gets started early with practice and qualifying sessions. Today will see qualifying for both the Alan Jay 120 and the Porsche Carrera cup cars. World Endurance Championship cars also will be on track later this afternoon for practice runs.

This evening music will begin in the Sebring Fan Zone. A trio of shows will be presented, leading with local favorites Hard Candy.

Also this evening, raceway officials will gather to dedicate the flagpole area to Hendricks Field as a permanent park.

The city of Sebring will have two new council members. Only about 12-percent of the electorate turned out to put challengers Josh Stewart, Harrison Havery and incumbent Lenard Carlisle in office. They were the top three of five candidates running for a trio of open seats.

It was a record low turnout for the off year election. Only 793 citizens cast their ballots.

There will be no trial in the 2019 slaying of five tellers at the former SunTrust Bank midtown location in Sebring. The man accused in the indecent, Zephen Xaver yesterday pled guilty to five counts of first degree murder.

It capped a four year wait in the case. Next will be the sentencing phase. There's no indication on when that might be.

Highlands County has lost a huge chunk of history. Citrusman and local activist Marvin Kahn has passed away, he was 89. Among other things, Kahn, a member of the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame, was known for helping to establish the Highlands County Citrus Growers' Association, the local 4-H program and the Florida Cracker Trail Ride.

March 16

Today the action gets underway at the Sebring International Raceway in earnest with both the Alan Jay 120 and Porsche Carrera Cup races to take to the track. Also slated are an autograph session for the Alan Jay drivers as well as practice laps for Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring competitors and qualifying for tomorrow's World Endurance Championship 1000 opener.

This evening at 7:45, night practice will get underway for cars in this year's 12 Hours - it's one of the most popular events on the Race Week schedule.

After years of having Corvette lead the way, the Sebring International Raceway has a new pace car. Cadillac will take over those duties as the marque celebrates the 20th anniversary of their V-Series.

Cadillac is no stranger to Sebring, being a longtime competitor and four time winner at the 12 Hours. The collaboration kicked off last year with the introduction of the CT4-V Blackwing Sebring IMSA edition.

This year, Cadillac will be running in the top classes in both the 12 Hours and the WEC 1000.

According to reports, the man who pleaded guilty this week to five counts of murder in connection with the 2019 slaying of five SunTrust Bank tellers has written a note of apology. As part of the court documents, Zephan Xaver wrote that he was "...very sorry..." for what he did and wished there was something he could do to change what happened.

The punishment hearing in the case is set for January of next year.

The Florida Department of Health is urging residents in Highlands County to be aware of the continued presence of blue-green algae blooms in three local areas.

It's at the Lake Glenada boat ramp in Avon Park, Blue Lake off Lagrow Road, and the Lake Placid boat ramp.

Officials advise residents against drinking that water, swimming or skiing in it and any other such activities. They say to rinse off should people come in contact with algae-infested waters.

Coca-Cola officials say they are sorry for a problem at one its facilities in Polk County. An ammonia leak was reported yesterday at a bottling plant in Auburndale.

City officials say 20-thousand pounds of ammonia leaked from a tank while maintenance work was underway at the plant. No one was injured, and the leak was plugged after three hours, but some neighbors reported eye and throat irritation.

Coca-Cola issued an apology for the inconvenience this may have caused workers and residents, and the company says it greatly appreciates the quick and effective response from the city and county.

March 17

The undercard races are over and the headliners begin today at the Sebring International Raceway. The World Endurance Championship 1000 will take to the track at noon.

This reportedly will be the last WEC race at Sebring for a while, but they're going out with a bang. The drivers this morning will hold an autograph session at the WEC village, and a grid walk so fans could get up close and personal before their endurance race.

Also on tap for today will be qualifying laps for competitors in the 71st running of the Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of International Motorsports Association involvement with the 12 Hours of Sebring. It was in 1973 that IMSA founder John Bishop and promoter John Greenwood took over the race.

Now, officials from IMSA have announced a Hall of Fame and its inaugural class. Bishop - who already is recognized at the Sebring Hall of Fame - tops the list with his wife Peggy.

Also to be inducted in the IMSA hall of Fame will be 12 Hour winner Hurley Haywood and several famous auto marques including Porsche, Ferrari and Corvette. All three of them also are in the Sebring Hall of Fame.

A trio of Highlands County workers showed well at the 2023 Treasure Coast Equipment Rodeo with Highlands County Road Construction Inspector Brian

Stimson scoring the overall win. He was invited to participate in the State Equipment Rodeo to be held in Jacksonville.

Stimson won the Vac-Truck competition and placed in the Skid Steer competition. Ray Moro nabbed the third step the Street Sweeper category.

Thanks to commonsense policies, Florida became a refuge of sanity during the pandemic. That's what Governor Ron DeSantis said yesterday in an appearance in Polk County.

Desantis was in Winter Haven to mark three years since the '15 Days to Slow the Spread' initiative. DeSantis says Florida defied the COVID-19 orthodoxy that called for vaccine mandates and restrictions in other states.

Instead, he says we bucked the bureaucrats ensuring kids could be in school, Floridians could go to work and businesses could thrive.

March 20

Another 12 Hours of Sebring is in the books - and it was another barn burner. So many fans packed the 330 acres of the Sebring International Raceway, officials cut off general admission parking on Friday. There still were plenty of spaces in the offsite lots and the raceway trams were running all day.

In the end, a late race crash between the leading GTP cars allowed the Whelen Engineering Cadillac to back into the Winners Circle for the 71st annual Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

It's getting drier out there and that means more brush fires. Units from West Sebring were called out Saturday to quell a grass fire at a lot near White Pine and Northside Drives - near the Home Depot store. A Florida Forest Service crew also came in to help out.

About a three-quarters of an acre were charred before firefighters got it under control. There were no injuries and no cause for the blaze has yet been determined.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials are announcing another scam involving their office - and again, it's pay-for-play. Local officials say nobody from the Highlands County Sheriff's office is calling residents offering not to arrest people if they pay them not to execute a warrant.

Deputies don't call people with warrants, they drop by for a visit. Anyone getting such a call is urged to just hang up.

Two men are missing after an apparent drowning in Polk County. The sheriff's office announced yesterday that Winter Haven's Orlando Ortiz and Auburndale's Jeffrey Marrero went missing Saturday on Lake Eloise in Winter Haven. The two had rented a boat with Ortiz' girlfriend and Marrero's two young daughters. Deputies say Marrero and Ortiz jumped into the water to help Ortiz' girlfriend secure the anchor to the boat. Ortiz' girlfriend says the two men are not strong swimmers, though, and they went under. The sheriff's office says its Marine Unit, the FWC and Seminole County deputies will search the lake 24/7 until both men are found.

March 21

It appears that last week at the Sebring International Raceway was the safest place to be in Highlands County. Sheriff's officials, who provided security services for Super Sebring 2023, say of the 29 people booked over the four day Race Week here, only two of them came from the track.

The 12 Hours of Sebring traditionally pulls upward of 100,000 fans for the international event. Authorities say the crowd was both "well behaved" and "much bigger than in the past."

There were a couple of other incidents. Reportedly, one of the race team members fell from a golf cart and had to be taken to the hospital. There also was a small RV fire - that was quickly extinguished.

Highlands County School Board members will meet tonight, and again, the sex education portion of the schools' "comprehensive health education" program will be discussed. After nearly a year of review by a select committee appointed by Superintendent of Schools Dr. Brenda Longshore, board members were presented with a program called "Relationships Under Construction."

That curriculum has been up for public review over the past three weeks, and tonight, board members will look at accepting it for classroom use.

The public also will be given a chance to comment on the program. That session will be held at the Garland Boggus board room at the School Board complex beginning this evening at 5:30.

Impact fees will be on the minds of Highlands County commissioners when they meet this morning. Apparently, members of the Future Growth Fund Advisory Committee say they want direction as they move forward with a study on

whether or not taxes should be imposed on new residents or business in regard to their impact on the community.

Such fees were enacted more than a decade ago - but have been "on hold."

Members of the banking and real estate industries will be joined by contractors, engineers and developers - among others - to review the idea and report back to the commission.

Sebring Police are investigating a shooting that occurred on Monday morning at "The Spot" on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Sebring's Washington Heights Community.

Authorities have released no suspect information. It is known that a male victim was shot in the leg during the incident. Moreover, the victim is not cooperating with law enforcement.

Officers and Detectives are asking that anyone with information please contact the Sebring Police Department

A Lake Wales man has been indicted for murder in connection with the death of an Ocala man who died of an overdose of fentanyl-laced heroin.

29-year-old Tevin Lindsay of Lake Wales, who already had been in jail on other counts, now faces capital murder charges in connection with the June 2022 death of the man who was found dead in Lake Alfred.

In addition to the capital murder count, Lindsay has been charged with a long list of drug counts.

The search for two missing boaters in Polk County is over. Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd announced yesterday that the bodies of Jeffrey Marrero and Orlando Ortiz were found at the bottom of Lake Eloise in Winter Haven.

The two friends went missing Saturday while boating with Marrero's two young children and Ortiz' girlfriend. Judd says the water was rough that day, and the two were not strong swimmers.

He calls their deaths a tragedy of monumental proportions.

March 22

Super Sebring 2023 is over, but the racing action continues at the Sebring International Raceway. This weekend the Historic Sports Car Racing series rolls into town with their season-opening "Spring Fling" event.

Among the featured races will be the Porsche Sprint Challenge, the USF Pro2000, a BRM Chronograph Enduro, as well as the Stoner Car Care Global GT and Classic Cup RS races.

It's the fourth of 14 scheduled ticketed events at the Sebring International Raceway - the Spring Fling runs Friday thru Sunday.

Highlands County commissioners yesterday voted to elicit quotes for a consulting firm to do a new and all-inclusive economic study of the county.

The goal to get the financial numbers in an effort to look at the possible re-institution of impact fees and to find other revenue sources for the county such as taxing units or fees for service.

Commissioners say they need the money for projects throughout the county. They promised - unlike previous studies, the results would not remain on the shelf. The study is estimated to cost in the neighborhood of \$100,000.

The vote was 4-1 with Commissioner Arlene Tuck dissenting.

Highlands County school board members and the current school administration were taken to task at last night's school board meeting. Former teacher Corey Wolfenberger and resident Jesse Sapp pointed to qualified teachers leaving the system.

Wolfenberger said she quit her Fred Wilde Elementary School position and pulled her kids out after her fourth grader was bullied by a teacher.

Wolfenberger said the teacher faced no repercussions. She said she personally had seen excellent teachers being treated badly, while poor educators are incentivized.

Sapp alluded to a recent survey where more than 100 teachers responded that they did not feel their opinions were valued.

Board members had no response to either presentation.

Units from the Florida Forest Service were called to the Arbuckle Creek Road area yesterday to contain a wildfire. An engine and a couple of dozers were used to contain the blaze - estimated at 10 - 15 acres.

No structures were threatened, no injuries were reported, and cause of the fire has not yet been released.

Authorities remind citizens, we are in the dry season and to be careful with combustibles and any outside burning.

A Frostproof woman was killed last night in a Babson Park traffic crash. According to reports, 53-year-old Patricia Roberts pulled from the parking lot The Coop restaurant on the Scenic Highway, and into the path of an oncoming pickup.

She was hit broadside. The force of impact caused her Kia Stinger sedan to catch fire. She was declared dead at the scene. The driver of the pickup, 19-year-old Coledon Snowden was treated for minor injuries.

March 23

The restructuring of traffic in Avon Park will be the topic of discussion at a community workshop in the City of Charm this afternoon. The program would involve the changing of parallel parking to head-in parking along Main Street and the closing of one of the lanes in each direction.

The goal would be to provide more parking and the slowing of traffic through the core area. Bicycle and pedestrian accommodations also will be discussed.

The meeting will be held at the Jacaranda Hotel from 4-6 this afternoon.

Having problems with your driver's license? The Highlands County Clerk of Courts office will be offering Operation Green Light today. It's an annual driver license reinstatement event that provides customers with the opportunity to pay overdue court-ordered obligations, in full without collection fees.

Those wanting to take advantage of the program can do so today and tomorrow at the Highlands County Courthouse from 8-5.

Those needing more information can call the Highlands County Clerk of Courts office and ask for Operation Green Light.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies have had to arrest one of their own. Sheriff's Office Detention Deputy Jore Arnold Stanberry has been charged with faking doctor's notes to extend his medical leave on a number of different occasions.

The investigation began when Stanberry's supervisors became suspicious due to the number of missed hours he'd logged. He was charged with counts of altering public records and passing a forged instrument and booked into the Highlands County jail.

After sitting vacant for several months while it's being sold, the Champion for Children's Circle Theatre will come to life briefly next month, as Harry Havery and the California Toe Jam Band get back together for a benefit concert. It will be staged on April 15th.

Donations will be accepted for The Champion for Children Foundation. It's one of a trio of exclusive partnership events slated for April.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials say East Main Street at Hollandtown Rd in Wauchula has been closed due to a fatal traffic crash.

They say the roadway will be closed for a significant amount of time. Traffic is being rerouted, please use an alternate route

March 24

Racing starts in earnest today as the Historic Sports Car Racing season opener takes to the track at the Sebring International Raceway. Qualifying sessions will be held for USF Pro2000 and Porsche Sprint Challenge. This evening will be the SascoSports International American Challenge, The Stoner Car Care Global GT and HSR Classic RS Cup races.

It's one of 14 ticketed events being held this year at the Sebring raceway. The Spring Fling runs through Sunday.

Firefighters were busy in Highlands County yesterday. There was a 2-3 acre brushfire in Avon Park Estates. Highlands Lakes, West Sebring, along with Avon Park City units and Florida Forest Service crews responded to the blaze.

There were no injuries reported, no structures were threatened, cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Units from West Sebring, Desoto City, Placid Lakes and Florida Forest Service crews were called to a blaze on Bridle Path, south of Sebring. Apparently, sparks from a burn barrel ignited that one.

Two outbuildings were totally destroyed. No injuries were reported.

Officials at South Florida State College have announced the short list of candidates to replace outgoing SFSC President Dr. Thomas Leitzel when he retires in June.

Among the three are Dr. Amy Bosley of Valencia College in Orlando, Dr. John M. Davis of Germanna Community College in Locust Grove, Virginia and Dr. Vicky Wood of Washington State Community College in Marietta, Ohio.

There will be community receptions for each of the candidates in April. The new SFSC president is slated to take office in July of this year.

It's an old event, with a new name. The Mall Festival in Avon Park will be held this weekend along the mile long mall in the City of Charm. Now dubbed "Spring-A-Palooza" some 70 different booth, exhibits and displays will be open for business tomorrow and Sunday.

The event has been moved from Donaldson Park to Main Street, and is described as a "Family Friendly" affair - with an inaugural "Tiny Miss Avon Park City of Charm" pageant, and live music on stage at Main Street and Lake Avenue.

An Avon Park man was involved in a crash yesterday that claimed the life of a Wauchula man in Hardee County. Florida Highway Patrol officials say the Avon Park driver was in a pickup that had stopped for a school bus on Main Street in Wauchula.

The driver of a second pickup failed to stop, and slammed into the rear the Avon Park man's vehicle. The Wauchula man was pronounced dead at the scene.

There was a hit and run in Frostproof. Apparently, a motorist took out the lower half of a utility pole at Otto Polk Road and Highway 27. The top half of the pole apparently remained connected, but the force of the impact disrupted power as far away as Sun Ray.

So far, the motorist and the vehicle have not been located.

March 27

A Placid Lakes man was shot and killed this past weekend in what authorities are calling a neighborhood dispute. Highlands County Sheriff's officials say the 62-year-old victim reportedly had become embroiled in a heated argument with his 72-year-old neighbor about driving across his yard.

When deputies arrived at the scene, the victim was found dead on the front lawn of his Thurman Avenue home. Apparently, this was not the first confrontation between the two men.

So far, no names have been released and no arrests have been made.

Sebring police still are on the lookout for 28-year-old Charles Javarius Hipps - in connection with a shooting last week in the City on the Circle. Hipps, also known as "CJ," is wanted for the wounding of a man at "The Spot," a business located near Martin Luther King Jr Blvd and Lemon Avenue in the Wahington Heights neighborhood.

Police say there is a pending charge against Hipps for attempted second degree murder in the incident. Anyone with information as to Hipps' whereabouts is asked to call the confidential Tips Hotline.

Another brushfire over the weekend. Units from West Sebring were called out to extinguish the flames in a wooded area off Arbuckle Creek Road across from the Maranatha Village. They contained the blaze quickly.

There were no injuries and no structures were threatened. Cause of the fire has not been released.

Avon Park city council members will get together in regular session this evening. Among other things, they'll hear from a group who wants to develop 13 acres off South Marshal Avenue into what is described as 116 affordable labor force housing units.

Apparently they will be asking to as many as 10 units per acres to make it work.

In other action, they'll hear from Hobe Sound attorney Matt Davis. He wants to address the council about the deteriorating conditions at the Lakeside Historical Cemetery on the city's Southside.

March 28

It won't be long before the Avon Park Mowerplex is nothing but a memory. Officials of NASGRASS say they are preparing to move all their infrastructure from their former raceway at the Avon Park airport to their new facility at the Florida Flywheelers' Park.

The move is scheduled to begin in early April. that includes everything from the bleachers and lights to flag stand and other equipment. The group announced last month they had decided to leave, due to requirements by the city they said they could not fulfill.

The Avon Park Mowerplex was the first for-purpose lawnmower racing facility in the United States.

Highlands County commissioners have created a new layer of management. The Critical Infrastructure Department comes with three high level employees including a Director, a Department Administrator and a Project Manager.

The new division will oversee the Solid Waste Department, Geographic Information Systems and work on drainage and water management issues. Apparently, it will involve another \$100,000 from the general fund.

Former County Engineer Gator Howerton will get a lateral transfer as the new Director of Critical Infrastructure. JD Langford has been promoted as the Highlands County Engineer.

A 34-year-old Polk County man reportedly was shot and killed while riding a dirt bike. The victim, from the Gordon Heights area of Bartow, was fatally wounded by a single gunshot in the area of Wheeler Street.

Polk Sheriff's officials say deputies originally were dispatched to a reported dirt bike crash. First responders arrived and discovered the victim had suffered a gunshot wound.

He was transported to a local hospital where he was pronounced deceased. An autopsy revealed that a bullet entered the victim's lower right back and traveled through his kidney, diaphragm, and lung.

Witnesses told PCSO detectives they heard at least one gunshot in the area.

A change at an annual Polk County event could get more kids interested in aviation. The 49th annual Sun 'n' Fun Aerospace Expo starts today at Lakeland Linder International Airport. One change made this year is to make attendance free for anyone ten-years-old or younger. An event official says the goal is to make sure that the millions of children that live within a hundred miles of the airport get the chance to understand what aviation is. Sun 'n' Fun runs through Sunday, and you can get more info at FlySNF.org.

March 29

Highlands County firefighters were called to a house fire at Sun 'N' Lakes South last night. According to reports, the mobile home on Sarasota Street was totally involved in flames when units arrived at the scene.

There were no injuries to report, but the place apparently was a total loss. Three people and their two dogs were displaced. Cause said to have been a dryer fire.

Units from West Sebring, the city of Sebring and Florida Forest Service crews were called to a brush fire at Sun 'N' Lake North yesterday. There's no indication

on how much ground was charred in the blaze near the intersection of Granada and Cortez Boulevards.

There was a 3.5 acre brush fire off Hallmark Avenue in Lake Placid last night as well. Units from Placid Lakes, Highlands Park, Leisure Lakes, Lake Placid and Florida Forest Service responded to that one.

No structures were threatened in either incident. There were no injuries reported and the cause of each of those fires is under investigation.

Officials remind residents that we are in the dry season - be cautious with all combustibles and open burning is discouraged.

A broken hip didn't stop a local couple from getting hitched. According to reports, Linda Cuniff and Joe Clark were set to exchange vows, when just hours before the ceremony, she fell in the shower and fractured her hip.

With all the paperwork signed, they contacted their pastor from the Highlands Regional Hospital emergency room by phone. He then pronounced the vows remotely and married the pair.

Hospital staff stood as witnesses and presented the pair with their first meal as a married couple.

A wildfire in Polk County is causing damage. The Right Gate Fire near Lake Wales covered 500 acres as of last night and was 50 percent contained. The Florida Forest Service says multiple outbuildings have been lost. Many camps at the River Ranch have been destroyed.

Apparently one edge of the fire is approaching Canopy Oaks off C. R. 630 E.

No injuries have been reported, and there's no word on a cause. River Ranch park has been closed until further notice.

An elderly man on a bicycle was killed in a traffic accident yesterday southeast of Lake Wales. According to reports, 90-year-old David Lynne had left Uncle Joe's Fish Camp and was attempting to cross Walk-in-Water Road, when he pulled into the path of an oncoming work truck.

The driver took evasive action, but the truck's mirror hit the man. Linne was taken to the hospital where he expired.

No charges have been filed.

March 30

As some Highlands County commissioners consider whether or not to impose impact fees, taxes and charges as new revenue sources for the upcoming fiscal year, a new report by Construction Coverage shows that homeowners in the Sebring-Avon Park metro area pay a median of \$1,150 in property taxes annually.

The study indicates that's about .7-percent of the median household income of \$48,500 a year. The local numbers are below the national average of \$2,800 in property taxes annually. That's set at a one-percent effective property tax, of an average national median household income of \$70,000.

More fires in Highlands County. Units from West Sebring and the Florida Forest Service were called to put out a brush fire off Lake Letta Drive yesterday. The road reportedly was closed for a time until the situation was resolved. Apparently, downed power lines started the blaze.

Meanwhile, officials say that fire at Sun 'N Lake north earlier this week charred about 15 acres before crews got it out. There were no injuries and no structures were damaged in either incident.

Good news from the Florida Department of Health in Highlands County. They reportedly have lifted the health alert for the presence of harmful blue-green algae toxins in Lake Placid at the boat ramp.

The most recent water samples taken by the Department of Environmental Protection did not detect algal toxins, meaning the public may resume water-related activities there.

However, they say, the alert remains in effect in Blue Lake and Lake Glenada at the boat ramp.

The Right Gate Fire in Polk County is contained. Now Florida Forest Service officials say they want to know what caused it. The blaze apparently burned nearly 660 acres.

The fire, sparked in the River Ranch camping area, broke out Tuesday in the area of south Lake Kissimmee and west of the Kissimmee River, and burned an estimated 660 acres.

It forced River Ranch to close as crews worked to contain the fire. The flames destroyed 200 outbuildings including sheds, and hand-made structures.

Lakeland District Wildfire Mitigation officials said dry, windy conditions were fueling the fire.

In 2017, another fire burned 6,500 acres and took a week to get under control.

Two more people are facing charges for a targeted attack on a Polk County pregnancy center.

The US Justice Department yesterday announced superseding indictments against Gabriella Oropesa and Annarella Rivera.

They and two others, who were already charged, allegedly spray-painted threats on the walls outside the Life Choice Pregnancy Center in Winter Haven last year.

The center offers alternatives to abortion for those with unwanted pregnancies.

March 31

Activities began today for the 2023 edition of the 12 Hours of BBQ. Professional and backyard teams from the Florida BBQ Association have fired up their cookers for competition in a number of different divisions. Gates opened this morning at the Highlands County Fairgrounds.

On tap for today will be live music, and a kids fun zone among other things.

WWOJ will be there with a live remote with Donnie Shaffer.

Tomorrow will feature a farmers market, a corn hole tournament and a car show. The BBQ Fest runs until 11:00 tonight and until 6:00 tomorrow.

Another big event is slated for tomorrow. The Miss Avon Park City of Charm pageant will be held at the Alan Jay Weildstien Center for the Performing Arts at South Florida State College. Eight young Avon Park ladies will be in the running for the 2023 Tiara.

This year's pageant will be judged on personality, poise, sense of humor and overall appearance. The theme for this year's pageant will be "A Royal Night at the Casino."

The search for Charles Javarius Hipps is over. Highlands County Sheriff's officials say the 28-year-old Hipps, also known as "CJ" turned himself in yesterday, and was booked into the Highlands County jail on counts of attempted second degree murder.

Hipps was wanted in connection with a March 20th shooting incident at "The Spot." That's located at the intersection of Lemon Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Sebring's Washington Heights community.

At the time the victim was transported to the hospital. There remains no word as to their condition.

Small hive beetles can be the nemesis of bees trying to make honey. So members of the Heartland Beekeepers are going to try and make it easier on their broods. The group is trying an experiment to determine what kind of beer might be the best as a beetle attractant.

Currently, they have a contest to determine what kind of beer might be best for the job. There are five choices ranging from pilsner to porter. They'll try the different varieties to see what attracts the most pests - so they might be dealt with accordingly.

Stay tuned for the results - it may take several weeks.