

Oct 3

The recovery efforts for Hurricane Ian continue today in Highlands County. Points of Distribution, or PODS are open at South Florida State College in Avon Park, at the Highlands County Health Department on George Blvd South of Sebring and the Save-A-Lot Plaza in Lake Placid. Water, ice and other necessities are being distributed there. They'll be open until 5pm.

At last report, there still are more than 11,000 customers of Glades and Duke Energy without service. Crews still are working to get the power back on again.

Storm debris collection starts today here in Highlands County. Residents are advised not to mix construction or other debris with yard waste. They must be separated for pickup.

Official information continues to be available on the citizen's hotline at 863-302-6800.

Regular trash collection will continue today, with crews picking up last Friday's collection today - the rest of the week will be pushed back one day.

On a brighter note, the Highlands County Tourist Tax is getting a shot in the arm with most local hotels and motels filled to near capacity. It appears a number of local residents have taken shelter in the rental rooms, as well as out of area hurricane refugees and recovery crews.

Highlands County commissioners started their emergency meeting this morning by extending the state of emergency. That will help to make the county eligible for additional state and federal assistance.

Currently Highlands is not in the expedited relief area for Federal Emergency Management Agency Funds. Local officials say that designation may come at a later date. It depends on a number of things including damage estimates in the county.

Highlands County officials are warning motorists not to try and use the intersection of Golfview and West Lake, inasmuch as it is in danger of a culvert collapse that could cause severe injury to motorists.

Road & Bridge officials had placed piles of sand in front of the area, but someone already has driven over the barricade.

Engineering officials now are looking for a replacement 72-inch culvert to do road repairs.

Sebring police are investigating a shooting incident. That one happened last night near the intersection of Lemon Street and Martin Luther King jr Blvd in the Washington Heights neighborhood.

The victim was taken to the hospital - no word as to their condition. It's unclear whether there is yet a suspect in the incident.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies were able to grab a carjacking suspect yesterday after a short chase. The 17-year-old juvenile reportedly stole a Chevy Malibu from a woman at the Lake Josephine Dollar General Store at gunpoint.

Deputies later spotted the vehicle on the Panther Parkway and gave chase. The driver bailed out and ran into a wooded area. Deputies, with the help of K9s and the Polk Sheriff's Helicopter were able to find and arrest a suspect.

An elderly Lake Placid man was killed in a one car crash over the weekend. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 80-year-old driver was northbound on Highway 27 when his Grand Marquis ran off the road and hit a tree.

He was taken to a hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Firefighters from a number of different departments were called out over the weekend to extinguish a fire in a large pole barn. Units from Sun 'N Lakes South, Lake Placid, and Highlands Park were called to the scene off Lake Apthorpe. No injuries were reported.

Oct 4

It was back to school today for Highlands County students for the first time in nearly a week. It remains unclear how much damage may have been sustained by buildings in the system, but classes will go on as usual. South Florida State College reportedly had damage on its campus, they will be closed through October 9th.

Meanwhile, the response to Hurricane Ian continues. Highlands County officials have announced they have received word that Highlands County is now included on FEMA's individual assistance list.

Residents will SOON be able to apply for assistance online at www.disasterassistance.gov or by calling 800-621-3362 - that's F-E-M-A.

The points of distribution - or PODS - will be open again today from 8am - 5pm. The locations again will be located at South Florida State College in Avon Park, the Health Department on George Blvd south of Sebring and the Save-A-Lot Plaza in Lake Placid. They will be open while supplies last.

Most electric has been restored to homes and businesses across the county last night, Duke only had about a hundred customers without service, Glades still had a couple thousand.

It appears phone and internet service is coming back. Local officials say of the 80 cell towers in the county, 13 of them still are out - that affects roughly 7,800 customers - repairs continue.

Debris collection continues today. Residents are reminded that construction debris, furniture and construction debris MUST be separated from yard waste in order to have it picked up. They also ask that yard debris be left loose - and not bagged up. A detailed flyer is available on the county's Facebook page.

Tipping fees have been waived at the landfill for residents bringing in hurricane debris, the county also has made a form for local commercial contractors removing debris from residential customers in the county to take advantage of the waived fees as well.

Official information is available on the Citizens Hotline at 402-6800. That will be open until 7:00 this evening.

Firefighters were called out early this morning to battle the flames at a house in Lorida. The call to the Hicks Road address came in shortly after 1:AM. It appears there were no occupants in the dwelling at the time of the blaze.

Cause of the fire has been turned over to the State Fire Marshal's Office.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials now have identified a suspect apprehended in connection with a carjacking incident Sunday evening. Charged with armed carjacking, grand theft auto and fleeing to elude was 17-year-old Tyrease Nashawn Perry.

The car was taken from a woman at gunpoint at the Dollar General store off Twitty Road. But deputies were able to locate it via the vehicle's ONSTAR system. They were able to use the system to shut the car off during a pursuit on the Panther Parkway.

Perry was arrested a short distance from the traffic stop and taken into custody without further incident.

A Highlands County man has been sentenced to 20-years in prison on drug and weapons charges. 38-year-old Shelton Andrews drew the sentence yesterday at a Federal Court in Miami. Andrews had been charged with possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Oct 6

Life is returning to normal in Highlands County as the recovery from Hurricane Ian continues. Most electrical service has returned, although internet remains out in some places and cell phone service continues to be spotty.

Additionally, 90-percent of businesses are back up and running, including grocery stores, gas stations, most restaurants and dry goods stores.

All points of distribution have now been shut down, and the hurricane shelters also have been closed.

The debris collection continues, with crews so far picking up better than 6,000 cubic yards. Residents are reminded that debris must be separated into piles of yard waste, construction debris, and household goods in order to ensure pickup. Yard waste cannot be bagged up, and must remain loose.

Tipping fees have been waived at the landfill for homeowners bringing in debris from their yards. Provisions also have been made for contractors hauling in local debris.

Those needing to apply for help from the Federal Emergency Management Administration may do so by calling 1-800-621-FEMA or 1-800-621-3362. They also may apply online at www.disasterassistance.gov.

Official information may be obtained through the Citizens' Hotline at 402-6800. That will be open from 8am until 5pm.

There may be an upcoming investigation in the Highlands County School system, and it could have something to do with the office of Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore.

At their meeting Tuesday, outgoing board attorney John McClure asked about the hiring of a Tallahassee law firm to do a third-party investigation into a matter, saying for him to do it would be a conflict of interest.

Board member Donna Howerton objected to any action, saying the matter should be brought back as an agenda item at a meeting where it could be more fully discussed.

No details were given as the item was discussed during the last 15 minutes of Tuesday's session. It was in a portion designed for reports and concerns; however, the superintendent's office was mentioned as they hashed out the item.

Activity in the skies will continue over Highlands County today as exercises wind up at the Avon Park Air Force Range.

Again, residents will be able to see jets and hear the sounds of freedom well into the night.

Three people with criminal histories are facing charges in a shooting that led to a deputy's death in Polk County. Sheriff Grady Judd has announced that Cheryl Williams, Donald Mathis and Joseph Albritton, Jr. were arrested for the shooting this week near Polk City that killed Deputy Blane Lane.

The 21-year-old and three other deputies were serving a warrant on Williams when she allegedly pulled what looked like a real gun on deputies inside the home. Deputies fired their weapons, and a bullet hit Lane, who was outside the home.

The 46-year-old Williams is facing 13 felonies, including second-degree murder of a law enforcement officer. Judd says she's still in the hospital in stable condition.

Oct 10

Things continue to return to normal today as students head back to South Florida State College. The school did sustain some window and roof damage from Hurricane Ian, but class will resume.

While there still is NO FEMA office open in Highlands County, a FEMA office has opened in Hardee County. That one is in the Civic Center in Wauchula.

Those needing federal assistance still can apply online at www.disasterassistance.gov or by calling 1-800-621-FEMA.

Avon Park city council members will hear from Small Business Administration representative Sandra Lawson when they meet in regular session this evening. She'll be talking about resources for recovery and mitigation after the big storm.

In other action, the council will look at taking the next steps toward hardening the Avon Park Fire Station, updating regulations for home-based businesses in the City of Charm and will discuss a number of planned, upcoming events.

A Lake Placid man was killed Saturday evening when his motorcycle collided with a car. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 21-year-old biker was southbound on Crestmore Drive, when a car turned in front of him.

The biker was taken to Lakeland Regional Hospital where he expired. Troopers say he WAS wearing a helmet. No charges have yet been filed.

A Frostproof man reportedly was killed in a weekend traffic crash. According to reports, 28-year-old Evelio Hernandez Ramos had just purchased a case of beer and was walking across Highway 27 when he was struck by a car driven by a 17-year-old Fort Meade girl.

Reports indicate Ramos was talking on his cell phone and may not have seen the car - he died at the scene.

The roadway was closed for about three hours while deputies investigated the incident.

Oct 12

Avon Park residents will be getting a bit of a reprieve as they recover from Hurricane Ian. Code Enforcement officers in the City of Charm will be backing off a bit while debris is piled along the roadway waiting for pickup.

The officers have been busy knocking on doors reminding folks that their debris must be separated into three individual piles for pickup. One for vegetative materials, a second for household goods and a third for construction & demolition debris.

The relaxed enforcement will be on until mid-November.

Highlands County Commissioner Arlene Tuck will be holding office hours this afternoon. The District Four Commissioner will be at the Sebring Chamber of Commerce Conference Room from 4-6pm to discuss some new ideas for the county, and to take input from residents.

Refreshments will be served.

A lifelong dream is now fulfilled for a fallen Polk County sheriff's deputy. A memorial service was held yesterday at Lakeland's Victory Church for Blane Lane.

Governor Ron DeSantis and about a thousand others paid their respects to the 21-year-old who was shot to death in the line of duty last week. Lane hoped to be sheriff one day, so Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd presented Blane's family with a plaque recognizing their son as Honorary Sheriff for eternity.

Oct 13

Avon Park city council members continue crafting their boards, authorities and commissions as they look at making the City of Charm more business and resident friendly. Former Avon Park city council woman Brenda Gray was up for an appointment to the city's housing authority Monday evening.

However, council members decided to hold off, saying they wanted to find out if there are other citizens who'd like to serve. They are advertising the post for the next month and a half to find out if there's any interest.

There's good news for Highlands County residents who have not yet registered for disaster relief. A FEMA disaster recovery center is slated to open here tomorrow. It will open Friday morning at 9am in the Bert J. Harris Agricultural Civic Center.

Those wishing to apply in person must bring an insurance determination letter, proof of occupancy or ownership and identification.

They also need to bring photos of damage to the home, and a list of damaged or lost items. Registration still may be accomplished online at www.disasterassistance.gov or by calling 1-800-621-FEMA.

County Road 621 was closed near the intersection of Godwin Road in Highlands County last night due to a traffic crash. Early reports indicate at least one person was killed in the incident.

Florida Highway Patrol officials worked the accident but have released no names or other details on the mishap.

Hardee county residents will be seeing some increased air traffic over the next few days - but it has nothing to do with the bombing range. Instead of jets, there will be small planes, flying low in straight, repetitive lines.

Those aircraft will be doing mosquito control in various parts of Hardee - especially places that were hit by flooding caused by Hurricane Ian.

Standing water provides a breeding ground for the biting bugs, and local officials don't want to see a boom in the mosquito population.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office is investigating another deputy-involved shooting. This one occurred in the community of Davenport.

According to reports, the deputy was shot in the chest, but the bullet was stopped by his bullet-proof vest. The suspect, 41-year-old Gabriel Batista was not injured, and was arrested.

Deputies were responding a family disturbance when the incident occurred.. The deputy who was shot was taken to the hospital and may be released later today.

Alcohol is suspected in a crash that killed a child in Polk County. A pickup truck went off the road early yesterday near Polk City and hit some trees. The sheriff's office says a 22-month-old boy who was not in a car seat was ejected and died at the scene. A five-year-old boy suffered a fractured neck. Polk City's Guadalupe Najera Santana was arrested on charges that include DUI manslaughter and driving with an expired license. Deputies say the 30-year-old had a blood alcohol level almost twice the legal limit. She was not hurt. The Mexican national is in the country on an expired work visa, and ICE has been notified.

Oct 14

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies have made an arrest in connection with a burglary incident during the response to Hurricane Ian. Somebody broke in to Edgewood Landscaping - damaging vehicles and stealing equipment that could have been used in helping hurricane recovery.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials now say they have arrested Dominic Alex Oliver in connection with the crime. The 27-year-old Avon Park man reportedly has confessed and led deputies to where the equipment had been stashed.

He has been charged with burglary during a state of emergency, grand theft and felony criminal mischief.

Florida Highway Patrol officials now say it was a Lorida resident that was killed in a two-vehicle accident Wednesday night. According to reports, the 60-year-old man was on County Road 621 and had stopped to assist a disabled vehicle.

As he walked back to his pickup, he was struck and killed by a van. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The incident remains under investigation.

It now apparently is easier to run a business out of your home. Avon Park city council members received an update from the Central Florida Regional Planning Council outlining new state statutes regarding home occupation standards.

Although there are some regulations on parking, noise and nuisance factors, residents now will be able to do many more things at their homes.

State officials have removed much of the home rule regarding residential districts.

Oct 24

Avon Park city council members will continue their efforts to make the City of Charm more business friendly when they meet this evening in regular session. They will hold a second reading and public hearing on a measure that will make it easier to have home-based businesses there.

The council also will look at inking a new contract to keep the Mowerplex on the Avon Park airport grounds. The facility is the first for-purpose lawn mower racetrack in the United States.

In other action, the council will look at a code enforcement moratorium for debris clean up and talk over approving several upcoming special events.

A motorcycle and a van reportedly collided last night. The mishap occurred about 6:00 on County Road 29 near Lake Placid.

Florida Highway Patrol officials have released no details on the incident. However, apparently at least one person was transported to an area hospital.

One person was killed and another was seriously injured in a weekend traffic crash on Highway 27 near Frostproof. According to reports A Ford SUV pulling a trailer went off the road and flipped - ejecting two of the occupants.

Killed was 37-year-old Jose Carlos Guterrez Soto of Bartow, 39-year-old Cornilio Guterrez Soto was taken to a trauma center with non-life-threatening injuries.

Reportedly, the SUV may have suffered a blow-out.

Oct 25

It may be a while before the lawnmower races start again at the Avon Park Mowerplex. City council members last night stopped short of signing a contract with NASGRASS, saying they first want an environmental study of the former landfill where the racetrack is located, to see how much, if any, pollution may be there.

Wes Pyburn, president of the lawn racers association, said they had investigated such a study but found it to be cost prohibitive. They also objected to a proposed month-to-month contract, saying such an arrangement made it difficult to plan their season.

Avon Park city staff was charged with investigating the matter, and bringing it back at their next council session.

Polk County Sheriff's officials have arrested an Orlando man in connection with a rash of burglaries across a half-dozen Florida counties including Highlands. 37-year-old Carl Dunlap was apprehended on I-4 by Polk Sheriff's deputies.

He is accused of thefts in Lake, Sumter, Volusia, Orange, Polk and Highlands County.

Dunlap was booked into the Polk County jail on a long list of charges ranging from attempted murder to driving while license suspended.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials say they are receiving reports of solicitors calling citizens and attempting to collect funds for disaster relief on behalf of the Sheriff's Office there.

They say THOSE CALLS ARE NOT LEGITIMATE.

Hardee County Sheriff Vent Crawford says he has not authorized any organization to solicit funds on their behalf and is not requesting donations be made for a specific disaster relief project.

Authorities remind citizens - never donate to an organization without verifying their legitimacy.

Oct 26

It may not be news to many, but the Sebring/Avon Park area does not show well when it comes to high paying jobs. A new study looking at affordable locations in America shows that locally, there aren't many folks pulling down six-digit salaries.

The analysis shows that less than one half of one percent of the local population gets that kind of paycheck. Highlands has .4-percent of workers here making more than \$100,000 a year. That compares to a national average of 6.4-percent of the population getting that kind of payday.

Three Florida colleges - including South Florida State College - will be getting funding to train students in what Governor Ron DeSantis calls high-demand fields.

Governor DeSantis yesterday announced SFSC, Daytona State College and St. Petersburg College will split some nine million dollars to help fund students who want to enter emergency management, law enforcement, health care and education.

The money is coming from the Critical Workforce Needs Grant Program.

DeSantis says these are especially important occupations in communities after a disaster like Hurricane Ian.

The polls open tomorrow in Highlands County for this year's election. In addition to the Governor, some judges and state constitutional amendments, one county commission seat remains up for grabs.

Early voting will be held at the Lake Placid Government Center, the Avon Park City Council Chambers as the Penny Ogg Operations Center in Sebring. Election Day will be Tuesday, November 8.

Some Republican officials are urging their voters to hold onto their ballots until Election Day to minimize the possibility of tampering.

A Fortune 500 company is expanding at a school in Polk County. International Flavors and Fragrances laid the foundation yesterday for a new facility at Florida Polytechnic University in Lakeland.

The Citrus Innovation Center will be a place where IFF can do research on citrus flavors and fragrances to be used in food, drinks and beauty products. An IFF official says it'll be a beacon for innovation and excellence.

Florida Poly's president says he's proud that IFF recognizes the strategic advantage in partnering with the school.

Oct 27

The polls open this morning in Highlands County for this year's elections.

Early voting will be held at the Lake Placid Government Center, the Avon Park City Council Chambers and the Penny Ogg Operations Center in Sebring. Election Day will be Tuesday, November 8.

That being said, there already have been more than 8,000 residents who have voted by mail. That's nearly 12-percent of the electorate.

Some Republican officials are urging their voters to hold onto their ballots until Election Day to minimize the possibility of tampering.

In addition to the Governor, some judges and state constitutional amendments, one Highlands County commission seat remains up for grabs.

The World Racing League officially arrives at the Sebring International Raceway this morning. Cars and drivers from all over the world will begin loading in for three days of activities - including a couple of eight hour endurance races.

GT and prototype-like entries in a number of different divisions will compete in the multi-class races - just like the 12 Hours. This year's WRL race will be shorter by comparison. Last year, the series ran the first 24 hour race ever at the Sebring International Raceway.

A life-threatening accident has a Polk State College student on a new path. Chase Roberts was left a quadriplegic after a car crash six years ago, and he almost died. He was told he may be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life, but being able to wiggle his big toe gave him hope. Roberts underwent intense physical therapy, and he was eventually able to walk. That experience led him to PSC's Occupational Therapy Assistant Program, and he's set to receive his associate's degree in December.

Oct 28

Early voting started yesterday in Highlands County with a light turnout across the three polling locations here. Some 1,660 people showed up to cast ballots in person in Lake Placid, Sebring and Avon Park.

Although the attention has been focused on the Governor's race, the constitutional amendments and merit retention for judges - there is a Highlands County commission seat up for grabs as well as the mayor's office and a city council seat in Avon Park.

There's lots of activity today out at the Sebring International Raceway. First, competitors in the World Racing League will start qualifying in all divisions for their weekend event. That'll start at 1:00 this afternoon.

The GT and Prototype-Like cars will be running a couple of eight-hour enduros tomorrow and Sunday.

Beginning at 7:00 this evening there will be Race Car Trunker Treat out at Sebring International. In addition to goodies and race cars on display, there will be a kids costume contest.

The annual Halloween on the Circle event will be held in Sebring this evening. That event gets started at 5:30 with Tricker Treating, there will be a live DJ, food, games and photo opportunities. It's being billed as a "family friendly" event.

First Baptist Church in Sebring will host a block party this evening with games, a bounce house, food and pumpkins.

The traditional Tricker treating is set for tomorrow evening across Highlands County.

The D-SNAP food assistance program will start tomorrow in the Alan Jay Center at the Highlands County Fairgrounds. Local officials expect the response to be so great, they have closed a section of Kenilworth Blvd from 6am-6pm both days

Meanwhile, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other programs currently have their offices in operation out at the Ag-Center. There residents can apply for disaster assistance in the wake of Hurricane Ian. No reservations are required, it's first come, first served.

NOVEMBER

11/1

The training sorties don't seem to be letting up at the Avon Park Air Force range. Officials there say that they will have training exercises at the bombing range going on until late tonight.

They caution that there will be increased levels of noise as the pilots work on honing their skills.

Highlands County commissioners heard this morning from residents of Lake Letta. They are asking for help in rising water levels there in the wake of Hurricane Ian. Governor Ron DeSantis has said the storm represented a 500 year flood event and citizens said that a number of docks are as much as a foot and a half under water and the levels continue to rise.

They say the problem is spreading to Lake Lotela, Bonnet Lake to Carter Creek, Arbuckle and ultimately to Lake Istokpoga.

Commissioners agreed to call in staff and state agencies to see what could be done to solve the problem.

It's not been a good night on Highway 27. First, a herd of cows got loose on the Highway near County Road 721 in Venus. One semi tried to avoid the cattle and rolled, a second hit at least one of the bovine. Reportedly, no humans were seriously injured but apparently some of the cows may have been hurt.

It took citizens and law enforcement officials a while to round up the livestock.

At least one person was injured this morning in an accident in Avon Park. That one occurred on Highway 27 in front of Bill Jarret Ford.

No names or other details have been released in that one.

An accident on Memorial Drive this morning near the college. The roadway was shut down for a time at the railroad tracks. No injuries were reported in the mishap.

11/2

Contract haulers have been working their way through Highlands County, picking up debris from Hurricane Ian. To date, the trucks have taken in nearly 216,000 cubic yards of vegetative debris.

Some 19,000 cubic yards have come out of Avon Park, with nearly 17,000 out of Sebring and 10,000 out of Lake Placid. The bulk has come from the unincorporated area where trucks have taken in almost 169,000 cubic yards.

Haulers say they've had problems with piles co-mingled with household and other debris. They also have had issues with bagged debris, and piles placed too close to mailboxes, powerlines and other obstructions.

They plan to have the first pass done in the next couple weeks, with one more pass to come.

The Sebring Regional Airport is in line for a \$1.8 million dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce. The Economic Development Administration money is going for storm water drainage improvements at the airport's Logistic Center.

The project is designed to increase and grow new business. Proponents say it will retain 345 current jobs, create more than 200 new jobs and generate as much as \$36 million dollars in private investment.

The EDA grant is slated to be matched with nearly a half million dollars in local money.

A motorcyclist was injured last night in an accident on the south end of the county. The collision reportedly happened around 5:30 on County Road 621 near Lake Placid.

Florida Highway Patrol officials have released no names or other details on the incident.

Hardee County Sheriff's Office reportedly are investigating Hardee Junior High School student, after he allegedly made verbal threats to "shoot up the school."

Detectives say the youngster admitted to making the threats during a bus ride, because he and his brother have continually been bullied.

The student denied having access to firearms, and the parents confirmed there were no firearms in their home.

Hardee Sheriff Vent Crawford reminds students and parents to always take threats of violence seriously and report them to law enforcement.

The search for a new Highlands County administrator came under fire at this week's county commission meeting. Resident Ray Royce, who also is the executive director of the Highlands County Citrus Grower's association and a Lake Placid Town Councilman, took Strategic Government Resources to task for a perceived lack of effort in the process.

Royce said he saw little recruitment from the Texas-based firm, saying they simply were application takers. He also noted many of the applications were from the same people who had sought similar jobs across the country.

Commissioners hired SGR this past July to find a replacement for Randy Vossburg - who left for an administrator job in Virginia.

A "What's Up Downtown" meeting was held this morning in Sebring by local tourism officials. The idea was to inform business owners and other about upcoming events in the City on the Circle and to dispense information regarding business recruitment.

Officials from the Federal Emergency Management Administration say Highlands is the beneficiary of a number of accidental tourists. There still are victims of Hurricane Ian spending time in local hotel and motel rooms.

Hardee Junior High and Hilltop Elementary in Wauchula were locked down for a time this morning. Hardee County Sheriff's officials say suspicious activity at a bus stop spawned an investigation that caused the lockdown.

Deputies did make an arrest but said there were no weapons found. The incident remains under investigation.

Lake Wales police are pursuing a cold case murder, to the extent of moving a house. Reportedly, information has surfaced that the body of Debbie Wilson had been buried under a house near the Florida Natural factory.

A preliminary search found bones, believed to be that of an animal. However, police want to move the residence for a more thorough search.

Wilson went missing in 1990, and is believed to have been killed by a boyfriend, who also now has passed away.

11/4

A new report by Smartest Dollar shows that the Avon Park-Sebring metro area lags behind the national average when it comes to the most new businesses per capita. The analysis shows that locally, we saw some 1,592 new business applications last year - which was 15.73 percent increase.

That's slightly behind the national average of 16.18 percent. That being said, local averages dwarfed national figures when it came to one, and two year changes in new business applications.

The Avon Park-Sebring area was up more than 46-percent over the previous year, with a two-year increase of better than 84-percent.

One of the big local tourist attractions will come to Highlands County tomorrow, as the Highlands Art League hosts their 55th annual Fine Arts & Crafts Festival. The streets in downtown Sebring will be closed off, as vendors pack the Historic Circle with all manner of paintings, pottery, jewelry, home decor and unique hand-made items.

There also will be food vendors and music from the "Outta Hand Band."

One of the Highlights of the festival will be the "Emerging Artists," juried art competition featuring the work of Highlands County students.

Somewhere between 5,000 and 20,000 visitors come in for the event, depending on the weather.

This is a weekend area bargain hunters look forward to all year long. It's the 15th Annual 39-mile Scenic Highway Yard Sale. The route runs up Alternate 27 from Frostproof to Haines City. Garage and yard sales dot the roadway along the Lake Wales Ridge with all manner of items from antiques, to curios, to clothing, tools, toys, musical instruments ... and ... junk.

It will run from roughly 8am until 3pm - or whenever people set up and tear down.

11/7/

You know all that hurricane stuff you bought? Don't put it away just yet. A system in the Atlantic is churning this way and early models show it coming up against the east central Florida coast.

Once known as 98L it's now known as sub-tropical storm Nichole and could impact us here in Highlands County. The system is in the Southwest Atlantic near Puerto Rico.

Governor Ron DeSantis says it's on his radar, and is encouraging Floridians to be prepared.

The National Hurricane Center says Nichole has a 90-percent chance of further development.

Early voting is over in Highlands County and nearly a third of the electorate has cast ballots for the upcoming election. Some 22,581 people have let their voices be heard. It's split nearly evenly between mail-ins and in-person voting at the three polling places open in Avon Park, Sebring and Lake Placid.

Tomorrow will be the official Election Day, with all polling places open for residents. Workers are preparing for what could be a record turnout for balloting on statewide candidates, judges, constitutional amendments - and one Highlands County Commission seat. Two Avon Park council seats also will be decided in this year's election.

Florida Highway Patrol officials now say it was a Boca Raton resident that was killed yesterday in a traffic accident on Highway 70. The man reportedly pulled his motorcycle from County Road 721, and into the path of an oncoming semi-tractor trailer rig.

The bike reportedly was dragged for a distance before the big truck could come to a stop. The biker was declared dead at the scene.

Highway 70 was closed for several hours at the intersection while troopers investigated the incident.

Florida Highway Patrol reports a Lakeland driver may have suffered a medical incident, then was involved in a traffic crash in Hardee County. That incident occurred on Highway 17-north near 9th Street in Wauchula. The man's

11/8

As Tropical Storm Nichole wends its way toward Florida. Highlands County has declared a state of emergency in advance of the storm's arrival. In a report to the commission, Interim Emergency Manager Mark Ellis told commissioners that Nichole will be basically a rain event, with most of the activity kept to the North of Highlands County.

At its current trajectory, the storm is expected to begin impacting Highlands County tomorrow night, with the bulk of the weather moving through the area on Thursday morning.

Currently, sandbags are available at the Road & Bridge Department on George Blvd in Sebring, with sand available on South George Blvd in Sebring, the intersection of Old Bombing Range Road & County Road 17 East in Avon Park and at County Roads 621 & 619 in Lake Placid.

Officials remind residents to bring a shovel and a friend to help load their bags.

It's the day candidates have been waiting for - Election Day 2022. Polling places across Highlands County will be open until 7pm as residents vote on statewide candidates, judges, constitutional amendments and one county commission seat.

Voters in Avon Park will look at a race for city council and the mayor's post.

About a third of the electorate in Highlands County already have cast their ballots either in early voting or by mail.

Apparently, there's a pretty big fire going on in Highlands County. Florida Forest Service officials say the "Placid View Drive Fire" Southwest of Lake Placid is 30% contained at 80 acres. The flames have been charring a wooded area along Placid View Drive.

Florida Wildlife Commission crews on scene with a number of Highlands County firefighters. So far, they say there are no threats to buildings or other property.

Polk and Highlands County Sheriff's deputies teamed up to arrest a man who allegedly had been shooting towards people and pointing a rifle and laser at a Polk sheriff's helicopter.

Polk County Sheriff's reports indicate 48-year-old Kenneth Massey was arrested near Avon Park. Sheriff's officials say Massey told detectives that he did everything because he was "being stupid."

Massey now faces counts of aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, unlawful use of a laser device and discharging a weapon under the influence of alcohol.

He was booked into the Polk County jail.

11/9

Highlands County's Emergency Management office now is at a Level 2, in anticipation of Tropical Storm Nichole. Latest models now show the center of the storm passing directly over Highlands County.

The Special Needs Shelter opened at noon today at the Highlands County Health Department. The Public Shelter will open at 4:00 - that will be at the Fred Wild Elementary School in Sebring.

Highlands County Commissioners declared a state of emergency at a special meeting yesterday. Officials of the Federal Emergency Management Agency closed their local office yesterday. They'll be shut down until the storm passes.

Highlands, Hardee and Polk counties remain under a Tropical Storm Warning. The Highlands County Call Center has been activated at 402-6800.

The memory of Ian still is fresh in the minds of Hardee County residents there. They opening shelters there this morning at 10am.

The pet friendly shelter will be at the Bowling Green Elementary School. The Hardee Special Needs Shelter will be at South Florida State College in Wauchula with the General Population shelter to be located at Hardee Junior High.

This year's elections are in the book - and just as in the rest of the Sunshine State, the Republicans rolled. Highlands County commissioner Arlene Tuck retained her seat, grabbing better than 72-percent of the vote.

In Avon Park, Mayor Garrett Anderson will be going back on the dais after getting better than two-thirds of the electorate there. Councilman Jim Barnard also won, scoring nearly 60-percent of the vote.

Residents in the City of Charm also approved a couple of ballot issues. One imposes term limits on council members, the other extends their terms of office from three to four years. That will put Avon Park on the same schedule as national elections.

Voting yesterday was brisk. Nearly 58-percent of the electorate turned out for this year - most of them for in-person balloting.

11/10

Tropical Storm Nicole has come and gone, without any apparent damage here in Highlands County. The storm came ashore early this morning as a minimal Category One Hurricane but quickly downgraded. It ticked north, and passed through Polk County at its closest approach.

There were some 571 customers without electric service during the storm, and no road blockages or personal property damage has yet been reported.

Local officials now are going into post-storm mode. The Emergency Operations Center is set to go from a Level 2, to a Level 3 this afternoon.

Both storm shelters will close at noon today. That includes the Special Needs Shelter at the Health Department and the General Public Shelter at Fred Wild Elementary School.

Highlands County school officials have indicated classes will resume for local students again tomorrow.

Trash collection will start again tomorrow after a hiatus today as the storm. Today's pick-up will be tomorrow, with Friday's slated pick-up to be collected Saturday.

Despite the incoming weather, Lake Wales police continued to work on a cold case file. Yesterday they worked with the Polk County Medical Examiner's office to excavate sand under a residence on J.A. Wiltshire Avenue, in a search for the remains of Debbi Williams.

The Lake Wales woman has been missing since 1990 and is rumored to have been killed by a former boyfriend. The search proved to be unsuccessful.

Authorities say the investigation will continue.

The University of Florida has a new president. The Florida Board of Governors yesterday confirmed the appointment of Ben Sasse. As part of the deal, the Republican senator from Nebraska agreed to not speak at political events. He also told the board he aspires for Gainesville to be the center of a revolution for higher education in America. He'll get a five-year deal at a base salary of one million dollars a year. With bonuses, he could earn over one-and-a-half million a year.

11/11

A Sebring man was killed today when he was hit by a semi tractor-trailer rig during the early morning hours. Florida Highway Patrol officials say the 42-year-old man was bicycling on Highway 27 and crossed into the path of the southbound rig near the Skipper Road intersection.

The bicyclist was pronounced dead at the scene. The incident remains under investigation.

Today is Veterans Day, the day Americans honor the men and women who have worn the country's uniform. Locally there was to have been a Veteran's Day Parade. However, organizers cancelled the annual procession due to the onset of Tropical Storm Nicole.

American Legion Post 69 in Avon Park will host a Veterans Day ceremony this afternoon. There will be a luncheon before the observance.

Highlands County officials have released a preliminary assessment of the impacts from Tropical Storm Nicole and they say it's all good news.

County officials maintain that during the weather event, Highlands County had sustained winds of 20-30 mph with maximum wind gusts of 35-40 mph. The county received about 2-3 inches of rain, but there were no reports of severe flooding, damage or blocked roadways.

All weather warnings for the county now have expired, the citizens hotline has been shut down and the county's emergency management system has gone back to a monitoring Level 3.

The landfill reopens today with yesterday's trash collections to be done today.

All public schools and the district office are open again for normal operations as is South Florida State College.

Now that the storm is gone, FEMA is back in business. Their Highlands County Disaster Recovery Center will reopen tomorrow at the Ag-Center.

However, County government offices are closed today - that, in observance of the Veterans Day holiday.

11/14

Avon Park city council members will take care of a lot of business this evening when they meet in regular session. It will begin with the swearing-in of Mayor Garrett Anderson and Councilman Jim Barnard - both incumbents handily won re-election in balloting earlier this month.

Council also will approve municipal budgets for the upcoming fiscal year both for the city and the community redevelopment agency. They also will look at a consulting firm for the city's drinking water system and consider purchasing several vehicles.

The board also will take a look at a number of proposed Christmastime events for the City of Charm.

The Sebring Parkway was shut down for a time near Memorial Boulevard due to a traffic accident. At this time it appears two vehicles were involved, with one apparently struck from behind.

It remains unclear if anybody had to be transported. Florida Highway Patrol troopers are on scene, but have not released any details on the accident.

The search for a wanted man has resulted in the arrest of a woman in Lake Wales. According to reports, police spotted a vehicle tied to suspect Carlos Williams, being driven by Shanel Mickel.

She told officers she had been with Williams, but did not know his current whereabouts. In a subsequent search of her room at the Prince of Wales Motel, officers found a cash of illegal and prescription drugs.;

Mickel was charged with numerous counts and booked into the Polk County jail.

11/15

A 77-year-old Sebring woman was killed yesterday in a chain-reaction accident on the Sebring Parkway. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the unnamed driver was westbound on the Parkway near the intersection of Spring Garden Road, when she lost control of her car and ran into oncoming traffic.

The woman first sideswiped a car being driven by a 52-year-old Sebring man. In all, five vehicles were gathered up in the crash.

Troopers say the woman was NOT, buckled up. Only one other person had minor injuries.

An item on the Avon Park city council's agenda to close a dirt road as part of a development plan, sparked controversy as residents of the Southside of the city turned out to protest the measure.

Councilwoman Bernice Taylor maintained that the path - she referred to as "the Old Beachfront Road," is a long-term connector with Highway 27.

At one point, Mayor Garrett Anderson had to pull out the gavel when Taylor got into a verbal dust-up with Councilwoman Brittany McGuire.

Anderson called on engineers for the 326-unit housing project to get with developers to find a solution.

Highlands County commissioners this morning gave the go-ahead to Spring Lake Partners to move ahead with a plan to convert some 28-acres from Agriculture to a Planned Development District.

The project, slated to be placed in the Fairway Lakes sub-division off Duane Palmer Blvd, would be known as "The Farm," and would consist of a community farm, micro farm, parks, ponds, walking trails and waterfront.

It also would include farm estates, farm homes, cottage homes, and townhouses. No timeframe for the buildout was announced.

Today is the last day that residents can take advantage of the waived tipping fees at the Highlands County landfill for Hurricane Ian-related debris.

Meanwhile the county's contracted hauler is continuing their sweep through Highland County. Residents are reminded to separate their debris into individual piles of vegetative debris, inert building materials and furniture and other like items.

The final push through the county is slated to start November 28.

A judge now will determine if the state can get the medical records of a Polk County murder suspect. Bryan Riley is accused of killing four people in Lakeland last year.

Defense attorneys reportedly are considering an insanity defense for the veteran. Prosecutors say they want a judge to grant them access to Riley's medical records from a Tampa VA hospital.

The defense argues the records are not relevant, and the prosecution's request is too broad. The judge did not make a ruling.

11/16

Highlands County has a new administrator. Following some discussion yesterday, commissioners moved to drop the word "interim" from Laurie Hurner's title, making her officially the new county administrator.

The search for a new administrator had drawn better than 30 applicants - seven of which made a short list.

In the end, commissioners agreed that Hurner had done a great job as the interim administrator, and voted to hire from within. Hurner now will get with County Attorney Sherry Stuphen to hammer out a contract.

Also at their meeting yesterday, Highlands County commissioners gave the go-ahead to Spring Lake Partners to move ahead with a plan to convert some 28-acres from Agriculture to a Planned Development District.

The project, slated to be placed in the Fairway Lakes sub-division off Duane Palmer Blvd, would be known as "The Farm." It will consist of a community farm, micro farm, parks, ponds, walking trails and waterfront.

Plans also include farm estates, farm homes, cottage homes, and townhouses. No timeframe for the buildout was announced.

Avon Park city council members had a bit of back and forth as they decided who to hire to oversee improvements to their drinking water system. Vice Mayor Jim Barnard lobbied for local firm Cool & Cobb to do the work - however, other council members wanted to stick with consultants Kimley-Horne.

They said that was their area of expertise and that Cool & Cobb currently had plenty of other projects to keep them working.

11/17

When it comes to new business, it appears the Sebring-Avon Park metro area is doing better than the national average. A new study by Hire-A-Helper shows that

4.6-percent of the workforce in Highlands County is being employed by new business - that makes for over 900 employees.

The local numbers beat the average of 3.9-percent of employees working for new businesses across the country. However, the share of new businesses here is below the national average. Our share of new businesses is just over eight percent, while the national average tops nine percent.

A Sebring man was arrested following a traffic stop by Highlands County Sheriff's Deputies. 34-year-old Steven Robert Thomas first was spotted driving erratically - veering over the center line of Lakeview Drive on several occasions.

He was detained on traffic counts, but a subsequent alert by Sheriff's K-9 Lady led them to a cookie box, containing crack cocaine, MDMA, fentanyl, and prescription drugs.

No cookies were found.

Deputies also found a .45 caliber pistol. Thomas was charged on numerous counts and booked into the Highlands County jail.

South Florida State College has a bit more cash for their Commercial Vehicle and Welding programs. Governor Ron DeSantis yesterday presented the school with a check for over \$600,000 to finance the schools.

In making the presentation, DeSantis said the state had to have the right training to fill key positions in the state's workforce.

SFSC President Tom Leitzel said the school will use the cash for scholarships, equipment and instructors.

There's a lotta water in Lake Letta. In fact, there's so much, Highlands County commissioners have closed the boat ramp and dock there, until water levels recede.

Residents in the area have been complaining about the situation for several weeks, saying the rains from Hurricane Ian have continued to swell the lake, sending problems downstream - all the way to Istokpoga.

Officials of the Southwest Florida Water Management District say this is not an unusual problem, and is not the worst one they're studying.

Police in Lake Wales continue to investigate another shooting incident at the Garden Apartments. When officers were called to the complex on South 4th street, they found two men that had been injured by gunshot wounds.

They also found bullet holes in nearby parked cars and at least one apartment. The two victims were taken to the hospital for treatment with non-life threatening injuries. Police have not made any arrests. They ask anyone with information, to give them a call. All tips will be kept confidential.

11/28

The local Christmas season gets underway officially this evening in Avon Park, with the annual Christmas parade. Staged by the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce, it is the first of the three holiday processions here.

More than 60 units, including floats, dancers, bands and antique cars. will head down Main Street beginning at 7pm. It all will be led by Avon Park Mayor Garrett Anderson and Vice Mayor Jim Barnard.

Avon Park Chamber Executive Director George Karos says it'll be the longest procession in several years.

Prior to the parade, the second annual Gazebo lighting will occur, that'll feature Christmas music and photos with The Grinch. Those festivities will commence at 5pm with the lighting to occur at 6:30.

Officials from the Highlands County Tourist Development Council have announced another employee designated to help bring visitors here. Reagan Fultz has been signed on as the county's new Tourism Coordinator.

The Sebring native now will assist Tourism Consultant Casey Wohl in coordinating tourist development duties - including; administrative responsibilities, working with marketers & the public, and administering tourism grants.

A woman is dead after a test drive turned tragic in Winter Haven. Polk County sheriff's officials say 86-year-old Clifford Worme was test-driving a Nissan Rogue SUV Saturday when he collided with another car outside the Hill Nissan Dealership.

Davenport's Jean Worme was in the passenger seat of the SUV. Deputies say the 76-year-old died at the scene. Clifford suffered minor injuries, and the salesperson in the back seat was not hurt.

The driver of the other car also avoided injury. Investigators say everyone was buckled up.

11/29

Another successful kickoff for the local holiday season last night, as the Avon Park Christmas Parade went off without a hitch. Local officials first joined Heartland

Helping Hands in lighting up the newly refurbished Gazebo on the Historic Mile Long Mall, with the parade following the traditional route down Main Street.

The next processional will be in Sebring. That will be this coming Friday evening. Authorities there lit the Carousel of Lights on the Circle this past weekend.

The next step in moving the Florida Medal of Honor Park will occur this afternoon as officials hold groundbreaking ceremonies at the site of the former Girl Scout House in downtown Sebring.

The park, which commemorates Florida Medal of Honor recipients, is being re-located from its current site on George Blvd. near the Highlands County Health Department.

A quarter million-dollar grant has been obtained to help with the construction of the complex, which also will be used as an education facility.

They will take their first shovels-full of earth at 2:00 this afternoon on the grounds of the Highlands County Government Center.

Highlands County's contracted hauler is winding up the first pass and starting the final push through the county to pick up debris from Hurricane Ian.

To date they have collected more than 408-thousand cubic yards of vegetative debris. Of that, more than 15-thousand has been ground into mulch.

Residents are reminded to make separate piles for vegetative debris, construction materials and furniture or household goods.

Mixed piles have not, and will not, be collected.

Cars have arrived and are starting to be loaded in at the Sebring International Raceway for this year's Alan Jay Pistons & Props event. Staged by Historic Sports Car Racing, the Classic 12 Hour has hundreds of vintage and historic competitors signed on to run sprint races - as well as the BRM Endurance Challenge, The Stoner Car Care Global GT Race, and the Classic RS Cup.

Test and tune sessions will begin for all classes starting tomorrow morning.

11/30

Drivers and cars in this year's Alan Jay Pistons & Props event are getting their first official taste of the Sebring International Raceway today. Test and tune sessions are being run for all classes.

Qualifying races will start tomorrow. Also slated for tomorrow are competitions in the BRM Endurance Challenge, the Stoner Car Care Global GT Race and the Classic RS Cup.

The Alan Jay Pistons & Props event runs through Sunday.

Today is the last day of the 2022 hurricane season. In total, there were 14 named storms, including 8 hurricanes, with 2 being major hurricanes.

According to the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration - that falls a bit below the seasonal average. Two of the storms, Hurricanes Ian and Nichole affected our area.

While debris removal continues in Highlands County, the disaster recovery center in Hardee County is slated to be shut down at the end of business tomorrow.

Although the Wauchula office will be closed, residents still will be able to obtain FEMA assistance online.

A St. Lucie County child is dead after a family boat trip turned tragic near Dundee.

Polk County sheriff's officials announced yesterday that the youngster's body was found in Lake Annie near Dundee.

The nine-year-old was on a pontoon boat with his father and two brothers on Saturday when he fell overboard and was hit by the propeller.

He was not wearing a life vest and was not required to. Sheriff Grady Judd says poor visibility in the lake made it hard to find the boy. His name has not been released.

December

12/1

Competition gets underway today at the Alan Jay Pistons & Props event at the Sebring International Raceway. In addition to qualifying in all classes, the BRM Endurance Challenge, the Stoner Car Care Global GT Race and Classic RS Cup will be run.

A series of sprint races will take place tonight as well - those will start at 7pm.

The props arrive tomorrow, when vintage aircraft will taxi down the back stretch and park in the paddock.

Pistons & Props will run through Sunday.

If your yard sale sign or for-sale sign has gone missing - it may have gotten tossed. Commonly known as "snipe signs, Highlands County officials remind residents, they are not permitted in the county's rights-of-way.

County staff has ongoing maintenance projects like mowing, so any signs not removed out of the County right-of-way will be discarded.

A snipe sign is defined as a sign or poster placed on trees, fences, light posts, or utility poles, or staked into the grass, except those posted by a government or public utility.

Highlands County School officials have announced that Avon Park Middle School has been awarded this year's Florida Department of Education's Commissioner's Family & Community Involvement Award.

They reportedly picked up the honor for their Career Exploration and Opportunities Program. It's designed to provide career-readiness and employability skills to local eighth-graders.

Today is National Christmas Lights Day. Local fire officials remind residents as they decorate their homes, it's a good time to investigate the strands.

If they don't work - toss them out and get new ones. Faulty or incorrectly used Christmas lights cause 40% of Christmas tree fires. Look for frayed or cracked cords, wires poking through the insulation and sockets without bulbs. Also look for "indoor use" and "outdoor use" labels.

And remember, plugging in more than three sets of Christmas lights into a single extension cord can cause problems with overheating.

When hanging outdoor Christmas lights on your roof, don't use nails or screws to secure the lights as they can puncture the wires, causing the lights to malfunction or, worse, shock the person installing them.

Finally, Christmas tree lights should not be left on for prolonged periods of time or overnight.

Always have working smoke alarms in your home – they give you early notification to get out!

12/2

If you like Christmas Parades, this is your weekend. The Sebring Chamber of Commerce Christmas Parade will begin to move up Ridgewood Drive starting at 7pm tonight. Officials say this will be the longest processional for them in a while. There will be ten more units added and there's a waiting list in case anyone should drop out.

The Carousel of Lights was illuminated last weekend and the Maranatha Baptist Church will offer caroling in front of the Circle Theatre just prior to the parade.

Frostproof will hold their 30th annual Christmas Parade tomorrow. That'll kick off at 6pm Saturday. Frostproof's oldest living resident, Dot Williford will be the grand marshal. That'll run up the Scenic Highway, with a Holly Jolly Christmas Party at Henderson Field to follow.

The Hardee Chamber of Commerce will hold 'A Caroling Christmas' Parade tomorrow starting at 6pm.

Santa's Workshop will be before the Parade at the Wauchula Train Depot.

Today the props arrive at the Alan Jay Pistons & Props historic racing event at the Sebring International Raceway. Vintage aircraft will taxi down the backstretch and join the cars in the paddock. That's all slated for 4:00 this afternoon.

Qualifying and sprint races will run all day today at the historic track. For those who like night racing - there will be more of that tomorrow. The cars will run Saturday until almost midnight,

Staged by Historic Sports Car Racing, the Pistons & Props event runs through Sunday.

Highlands County sheriff's deputies arrested a man yesterday after shots were fired outside a home on Glacier Avenue in Avon Park. Authorities say nobody was injured in the incident.

However, 33-year-old John Joseph Edwards has been arrested and charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. No further details have been released.

One man was injured when he was attacked in Polk County.

Winter Haven Police say Jose Torres hit a man with a metal baseball bat at a gas station on First Street North.

The man then tackled Torres, and a woman in Torres' car then grabbed the bat and hit the man herself.

Police say the victim's girlfriend then intervened.

After that altercation Torres allegedly hit the victim with his car then rammed the victim's car before finally leaving the parking lot.

Torres is facing charges that include aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.

It appears that the Sebring location of Bed, Bath and Beyond soon will be closing. The chain earlier this year announced that dozens of its locations would be shuttered as part of a reorganizational move.

Store officials say their inventory now is on sale, with a sell off of store furniture and fixtures to follow. No official closing date has yet been announced.

Kaylee Tuck will be handling a gavel when the Florida Legislature re-convenes. The District 83 State House representative will be the chair of the Choice and Innovation Sub Committee.

There, they will review education bills and issues before they go before the Florida House. Highlands County is part of District 83.

A Tennessee man reportedly has drowned in a Lake Wales incident. Police in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge say they recovered the body of 31-year-old Christopher Shoemaker from Crystal Lake.

Friends said they last saw Shoemaker in the water there Wednesday evening, swimming. When he did not return, they called authorities.

Police say foul play is not suspected.

A Winter Haven man reportedly was killed in a traffic crash east of Lake Wales. Polk County Sheriff's investigators say it appears the man was pulling his motorcycle out to pass on Highway 60 East, out to pass slower traffic, and slammed into the side of a truck.

The biker was pronounced dead at the scene. His name has not been released.

Has your rent gone up? A new study by Construction Coverage shows that the fair market rent in the Sebring-Avon Park metro area has increased almost 17-percent since the onset of the coronavirus.

The good news is, that's below the national average of a 24-percent rental increase. The numbers show that locally, studio apartments are going for just over \$700 a month, while a 4-bedroom home is renting at \$1500 a month on average.

Experts say it's all about supply and demand.

Highlands County School Board members will look at hiring a new attorney when they meet tonight in regular session. Nominee Shannon Nash is slated to bring a contract agreement to the board. Nash would succeed longtime board attorney John McClure, who is stepping down at the end of the year.

The board also is slated to look at a proposed health and sex education curriculum. A committee has been working on a recommendation - however, nearly half the members dropped off before making a suggestion on which program to put before students.

Ivan James Sanders has been convicted of first-degree murder and aggravated child abuse. The verdict came down yesterday. Sanders was charged in connection with the October 2014 death of 4-year-old Mercedes Blair.

He reportedly will be spending the rest of his life in prison.

A couple of bad accidents in the area. Two cars collided last night at the intersection of Olivia Drive and State Road 64 east of Avon Park. Authorities say they have no information on that one.

There was a crash with injuries yesterday at State Road 60 and Buckmoore Road. Lake Wales police say that one involved a crane truck and a sport utility vehicle. One person was transported from that mishap.

NEWS 12/6/22 BF

FOUND BULL

Hardee County Sheriff's Animal Services Unit has impounded a small framed, solid black bull. The animal was found at large on County Road 664a between Heardbridge Rd and Lake Branch Rd. east of Wauchula.

They say there are no brands or other ID markings identified. Deputies say if that's your bull, you can call them at the Hardee Sheriff's office.

12/7

It appears there's an afternoon problem with kids on the Circle in downtown Sebring. City council members last night heard reports of middle schoolers running rampant in the area after classes let out. They reportedly have terrorized store owners, broken bottles and have stood in traffic to watch cars dodge around them on Circle Drive.

Sebring Police Chief Karl Hoglund said his department is doing the best they can do with the resources they have available. He currently is down four officers and has called in resource officers from area schools to help with the problem.

A 25-year-old Avon Park man has been apprehended and charged in connection with a shooting incident. It apparently occurred yesterday afternoon on Peel Street in the City of Charm.

Highlands County Sheriff's reports say Leon Devincey Kerney III had become involved in an argument with a man and his grandmother. Apparently, Kerney fired several shots in their direction - but did not hit anybody.

He fled the scene, but later was taken into custody. Kerney has been charged with attempted murder, firing a weapon in public, possession of a weapon by a convicted felon, improper exhibition of a firearm and firing a weapon into a vehicle or building.

It'll be back to the drawing board for Highlands County school officials in regards to their planned health & sex education curriculum. The issue was pulled from last night's Highlands County School Board agenda, following concerns over apparent Sunshine Law violations.

Superintendent Brenda Longshore's select committee now is being called to reconvene to again vote on what kind of curriculum to recommend to the board, and new school board Chair Donna Howerton called for a school board workshop on the subject.

No dates have yet been set, but it appears none of that will occur until after the first of the year.

Lori Hurner now is the Highlands County Administrator. Highlands County commissioners yesterday approved the contract with Hurner to officially take the post.

The job comes at \$160,000 annually plus benefits - which reportedly is less than what could have been paid to an outside candidate.

Hurner worked her way up through the ranks, starting out as the county's Agent. She had been serving as the interim county administrator.

A local welding company will be getting some help with what was described as a "tiny marketing budget." Patriot Welding Supply of Sebring has been declared a winner in the Melio's "Florida Shop Sweepstakes."

Reportedly, Patriot Welding was selected due to their impressive growth in a tough economic environment.

Information continues to trickle out about that Monday accident at State Road 64 and Lake Olivia Drive. Apparently, it was a van that hit a car at the intersection just east of Avon Park.

Officials now report that five people were transported from that crash. The Florida Highway Patrol has released no details on the incident.

A Lake Wales student has been charged after allegedly showing up at the bus stop with a handgun. The 13-year-old reportedly told his friends he thought the Glock 23 actually was a BB gun.

Police say it appears the youngster did not take the weapon on the bus, but instead hid it in the bushes before heading off to class. It apparently had been taken from a relative's home.

The youth has been charged with possession of a firearm on school property and possession of a firearm by a minor.

There will be a changing of the guard at South Florida State College. Dr Thomas Leitzel has announced he is stepping down as president of the school, effective at the end of June next year.

During his tenure at SFSC, he promoted the growth of the College and community partnerships, both private and public. Several new programs were developed including the Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, mechatronics and advanced manufacturing, construction technologies, and a complete restructure of the College's commercial vehicle training and welding programs.

According to reports, there was a thrill seeker earlier this week in the Caladium Capital. Photos on social media show somebody making a base jump from the Lake Placid Tower.

A base jump is where someone climbs to the top of a tall structure, then jumps and parachutes to the ground. The post claims to know who the culprit was, but declines to identify them.

Also known as the Happiness Tower and the Tower of Peace, the 27-story structure has been closed to the public for decades. It was built and opened back in 1961.

Highlands County Sheriff's investigators are working on an incident that reportedly spans a couple counties. Early indications are that a victim was stabbed in Hardee County, but was transported to Highlands.

Safety services responded to a Camphor Street address in Avon Park yesterday afternoon to render aid. There's no indication on the condition of the victim. No names have been released.

Highlands County has made the upcoming Florida Association of Counties 2023 Calendar, a photo entitled "Keep Calm & Love Water," will adorn the month of November on next year's FAC Calendar. This shot is a tranquil capture of the shores of Lake Istokpoga.

Florida Association of Counties President, Seminole County Commissioner Lee Constantine said it was tough narrowing down the 500 entries that were submitted for this year's publication.

12/12

The festive holiday season continues tonight in the City of Charm with Christmas in the Park. Sponsored by the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce, the event will feature performances of Christmas Music by the Avon and Memorial elementary school choirs as well as the Avon Park Middle School and High School ensembles.

There also will be performances by the Sweet Adelines, the Heartland Pops Clarinet Ensemble and the Avon Park High School Grenadier Band.

It all gets underway at 6:00 this evening in Donaldson Park.

Avon Park city council members will meet tonight in regular session. Among other things they'll look at purchasing water meters and a new fire truck. In other action, they'll discuss a number of events planned for next year including a Three Kings celebration, a Fusion Festival and a Big Time Wrestling event.

Prior to this evening's event, the council will sit as the city's Community Redevelopment Board. They'll talk about downtown parking and discuss a Spring-A-Palooza event with representatives of Heartland Helping Hands.

12/13

Highlands County residents will be hearing the sound of freedom today, as officials at the Avon Park Air Force Range have announced they are hosting another training session. The increased air traffic will run from mid-morning until late tonight. Noise levels are predicted to be high.

No word on what kind of aircraft will be working out or where they are originating.

One person reportedly lost their life last night in a traffic crash on the south end of Avon Park. The 2-vehicle mishap occurred near the intersection of Highway 27 and Robinette - just south of College Drive.

Florida Highway Patrol officials worked the accident - but have yet to issue a report.

Workforce housing took another step forward in The City of Charm last night as Avon Park city council members voted to close a right of way that will allow for the construction of some 325 houses between Lakes Anoka and Lelia.

Residents of the nearby Lacy Hills community turned out to oppose the move, saying they use the dirt trail as a path to Highway 27.

Council members disagreed, saying they needed the proposed rental community for families and a place for workers to live.

12/14

Fire Rescue members responded to a hard landing at the Sebring Regional Airport last night.

Two passengers were on board the single-engine aircraft when it went off the runway then went nose-in to the dirt. No injuries were reported.

Highlands County Sheriff's Office is conducting the investigation.

Harder Hall developers have released an update on renovations to the big pink hotel on the shores of Little Lake Jackson. They say that over the past few months, crews have emptied out the insides of the building and are about six weeks out for renovations to the tennis pro shop - which will then become their offices.

Next will be roof improvements, termite tenting and new windows. St. Petersburg Developer Robert Blackmon says it won't be fast - but work is underway.

Florida Highway Patrol officials finally have released details of that Monday night fatal traffic accident on the south end of Avon Park. A Sebring man was northbound on Highway 27, when his car hit the back of a van, careened off the road and overturned.

The 67-year-old victim was pronounced dead. The van driver was not hurt. The rest remains under investigation.

It appears Avon Park has a water meter problem. According to Public Works Director Rick Reed, there are 1,000 meters in the city that are not working and need to be replaced. City council members are doing their best to fix the issue, ordering a batch of Badger Meters that now will be put in to replace the inoperable ones.

Reed says some of the meters are more than two decades old and are made not to be repaired. Reed also took the time to announce his retirement. He'll be leaving the city January 9th.

Do you remember that bull found by Hardee County Sheriff's deputies last month? The Black Angus was found off County Road 664A. It has no markings and to date, nobody has stepped forward to claim ownership.

Now, Sheriff Vent Crawford says the bovine will be put up for sale, to help amortize what it has cost to keep him. The sale will take place December 20, at the Arcadia Stockyard.

12/15

Main Street in Avon Park may be losing a couple of lanes. City Manager Mark Schrader told Avon Park city council members that the artery could go from four lanes to two lanes. Florida Department of Transportation officials reportedly started the discussion, asking about converting one of the current traffic lanes to a bicycle lane.

Council members said going to that configuration, with angle parking, could provide more spaces for shoppers in the City of Charm.

FDOT officials said they would put together a draft proposal for study.

A couple of Polk County men are in custody after an incident near Sebring. Highlands County Sheriff's deputies responded to an orange grove off Payne Road, after a concerned citizen called about suspicious activity during the early morning hours.

Their investigation led them to a Ford F-150, containing 26-year-old Romerio Walker II and 22-year-old Eldred Kellum. In the back of the truck was a Yamaha 200 outboard motor.

A subsequent investigation led deputies to a boat in the grove, that had no motor. The owner of the craft told lawmen the boat had been stolen, and that motor actually had been part of the rig.

The two were charged with numerous counts and taken to the Highlands County jail.

Hurricane season has come and gone. Now local safety service officials are telling home owners it's time to take the boards off the windows. Fire codes require houses to have a safe means of escape in the event of fire or other emergency.

Having an available window can give people a way out, especially in bedrooms.

A new survey by InsureMyTrip has listed the top 100 festive cities for holiday travel. While Florida cities like Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Tampa made the Top 5, sadly, Sebring, Avon Park and Lake Placid did not make the list.

Ranking near the bottom were Sunshine State locations such as Sanford at 93, Key West at 97 and Punta Gorda at 98. The survey was based on: number of Christmas markets, holiday events, festive tours, the chance of snow, and number of searches for 'Christmas in ...'.

A pedestrian was killed near Lake Wales last night when they were hit by a vehicle. The accident occurred on Highway 60 near the intersection of Capps Road across from the Y'all Come Back Saloon.

A teenager wanted for murder in Pennsylvania is in custody in Polk County. Seventeen-year-old Henry Madera, Jr. was arrested at Mulberry High School where he has been a student for two months.

He was wanted for a shooting in Pennsylvania that left one person dead.

Madera is facing charges that include third-degree murder, and he's awaiting extradition.

12/16

You may think the area is growing quickly - but apparently, not by national averages. A new study by the Inspection Support Network, looking at the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States, found that the Sebring-Avon Park area grew by 1.2-percent over the study period.

That's about half the national average of 2.8-percent during the same timeframe. The numbers were gleaned from US Census bureau reports.

Officials of the Highlands County Tourist Development Commission are crowing about record tourism numbers - but the reasons behind the figures are a bit tougher to find. It remains unclear how much of the increase is due to higher hotel & motel room rates, and how many longer-term stays may have been funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for those whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Ian on the state's west coast.

Apparently, the largest month for tourism here was in March - during the annual Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring.

It appears that fatal traffic accident reported yesterday east of Lake Wales was a hit-and-run.

Polk County sheriff's officials say a passerby saw the man's body laying along Highway 60. The victim apparently was a 42-year-old Lakeland man.

Authorities say there was limited lighting in the area at the time of the crash. It appears the victim may have been struck by a large commercial vehicle, and the driver may not have realized he or she hit a pedestrian.

12/26

Highlands County joined the rest of the Sunshine State this weekend in blast of freezing temperatures. Local officials took the opportunity to open up a cold weather shelter. The facility was opened in the Ag-Center Friday and Saturday night.

There was one person each evening. There was no shelter opened last night.

Like hurricane shelter rules, those wishing to escape the cold had to bring their own bedding and other supplies.

Four youth were pulled to safety in a pre-Christmas boating accident on Lake Placid. According to reports, a number of off-duty Sebring municipal firefighters responded and pulled the boys from the water.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission officials are investigating the incident, but it appears the teens were in a craft that either capsized or sank.

The firefighters used a private boat to motor to the scene and pluck the boys from the water. The youngsters apparently had no life jackets. There were no serious injuries to report.

Units from Sun 'N' Lake South, Placid Lakes, Highlands Park, Lake Placid and Venus were called out over the weekend to a structure fire off Recreation Drive in Venus. The structure was fully involved in flames when units arrived at the scene.

A Gradall from the Highlands County Road & Bridge Department had to be dispatched to move debris in an effort to help responders check for any remaining hot spots.

No injuries were reported in the incident. Cause remains under investigation. The building reportedly was totally destroyed.

Highlands has joined 50 Florida counties affected by Hurricane Nicole, and now is eligible for additional Federal Emergency Management Agency protective measures. Those include direct federal assistance under the Public Assistance program.

FEMA's Public Assistance program provides reimbursement to local and state government agencies for the costs of such things as emergency response, debris removal and restoration of disaster damaged public facilities. Authorities say churches and other nonprofit organizations also may be eligible for that FEMA Public Assistance.

An investigation is underway after an inmate died in Polk County. Eric Nelson died Friday after he was arrested on drug charges in Lakeland. The sheriff's office says the 46-year-old kicked and bit three deputies at the South County Jail. He was shackled and brought to another cell, and as deputies were leaving, they noticed he wasn't breathing and was turning blue. Nelson was brought to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. No cause of death has been determined.

A new survey has found that when it comes to mortgage rates, the Sebring-Avon Park metro area falls significantly short of national averages. The analysis found that nearly 30-percent of the mortgages here had an interest rate lower than three percent.

That was well below the national average of 42-percent. In fact, Highlands was outpaced in all categories by national numbers including 30 and 15-year mortgages.

Another economic hit for downtown Sebring. Officials from the Happy Owl have announced that they are closing their Sebring storefront and going to an online sales platform.

Since the shutdown, they say most all of their customers are out of state and mail order. In the meantime, their 4,000 square foot building on Commerce Avenue is up for sale.

They are liquidating their current stock. No official closing date was announced.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials say they are tired of fetching up loose cows. They are calling on cattle owners to check their perimeter fencing.

They say deputies continually are responding to complaints of cows on the roadway, which pose a threat to motorists.

It's a misdemeanor offense to knowingly or negligently allow livestock to run at-large, and impound fees can cost upward \$500 county officials handle the animals.

A rescue story is unfolding in Lake Wales. According to reports, a woman, identified as Michelle Lee Carlton of Lake Wales, lost control of her pickup and slammed into a concrete utility pole. She apparently was trapped inside and the vehicle caught fire.

Passersby - described only as three young men, pulled over and extricated the woman from the burning vehicle.

Two people are hurt following a shooting incident in Lakeland.

Polk County officials say it occurred last night in Lakeland on Providence Reserve Loop near the Providence Reserve Apartments. Police say the victims were taken to the hospital in critical condition.

They have not been identified. No arrest has been announced, and there's no word on a motive.

12/28

Well, it appears Christmas is over, gas prices have made a jump across Highlands County. The hike ranges from 10 to 20-cents depending on the starting point.

The operative price for a gallon of unleaded petrol apparently has landed at \$3.09 at most stations here.

As people begin to strike their holiday decorations, officials from the Florida Forest Service are expressing concerns about old Christmas trees. They are asking people to use caution.

Dry limbs and needles from discarded Christmas trees, they say, can quickly become fuel for a dangerous wildfire.

In Highlands County, those trees would be put out with yard waste. For those who choose to burn their Christmas tree, they say know the law before burning outdoors.

Thanks to a Lakeland couple's decision to get a new toilet, a Polk County woman has her long-lost engagement ring back.

Shaina Day accidentally flushed the ring down the toilet at her in-law's house 20 years ago. She thought it was gone forever, but last month, it was found when her in-laws were getting a new toilet installed.

The plumber unhooked the commode and dumped it in the tub to get the excess water out. That's when the ring fell out.

It turns out the ring had been stuck in a toilet pipe all these years. Shaina's in-laws didn't tell her or her husband. Instead, they wrapped the ring and surprised them with it for Christmas.

Shaina says it was absolutely amazing, and Nick says it brought tears to their eyes.

12/30

Crews have cleared the Carousel of Lights off the Circle in downtown Sebring and things are ready to ring in the New Year. Highlands County will greet 2023 with a big New Year's Eve Party tomorrow evening starring Nashville recording artist Tommy Brandt.

There will be a car show from 4-6pm with a block party from 6pm until midnight. Featured there will be horse & carriage rides, games, dancing, food vendors and fire pits to keep warm.

Free hot chocolate and cookies also will be offered. The event is free and open to the public.

Highlands County Fire/Safety officials are reminding residents, while they can enjoy their privately purchased fireworks on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, come midnight Sunday night, they once again will be illegal and detonations need to cease.

They also encourage revelers to talk to their neighbors and indicate plans to set them off. They can prepare if they have skittish pets, or if there is someone nearby who is a veteran and may be suffering from PTSD.

And remember, keep a bucket of water or a fire extinguisher nearby in case of accidents.

A traffic stop in Sebring has resulted in drug charges for a Sebring man. Luther Jones jr. was pulled over just off the historic circle. K-9 Lady alerted to drugs in the vehicle.

A subsequent search found 30 grams of methamphetamine and another 25 grams of fentanyl. Jones was taken into custody and charged with counts of drug trafficking, possession with intent to sell, and felony possession of drug paraphernalia.

He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

A 20-year-old Avon Park man has been jailed in connection with a drive-by shooting incident Tuesday evening. Rohan Johnathan Coke jr has been charged with numerous counts, including attempted first degree murder. Authorities believe it was Coke who opened fire on a vehicle on Ezra Circle.

Two women and a year-old child escaped injury in the incident. Police say Coke eluded a traffic stop and search in the City of Charm, but later turned himself in.

He now is being held on \$170,000 bond.

Two men are dead after a shooting in Polk County. It happened yesterday afternoon in Lakeland near US 92 East and Fish Hatchery Road. The two have not been identified. No arrest has been announced, and there's no word on a motive.

The New Year will bring some new equipment to a law enforcement agency in Polk County. Lakeland Police are getting body cameras, and some officers may be using them as soon as this weekend. The city council unanimously approved the purchase of 250 cameras this month.. The ten-year contract with Axon Enterprises will cost over nine million dollars. The LPD is the fourth law enforcement agency in the county to get body cameras.