

APRIL

April 3

Hot on the heels of the latest fire at the Highlands County landfill, local officials are urging residents to learn how to properly dispose of lithium-ion batteries.

They say these little power sources are considered "Household Hazardous Waste," and should not be put in the regular trash. Instead, they should be disposed of separately like car batteries or boat batteries. That includes everything from cell phone batteries, to button batteries for hearing aids, remote controls and the like.

Officials say hang on to these batteries - then take them to either to a store that recycles them, or to the hazardous disposal site at the Highlands County Landfill.

You know you're in Highlands County when EMS is called to assist a resident who's fallen off a horse. It happened this past weekend in the scrub off Riverdale Road in the far northern reaches of the county. The patient was airlifted to the hospital - no word on what caused the accident or the condition of the victim.

Things continue to be dry in Highlands County - and that means more wildfires. Crews from Sun 'N Lake South were called out over the weekend to put out a grass fire off CR 29. Authorities say they believe it was started after a tire came off a boat trailer that had a bad bearing.

Quick work by the responding units kept the flames from spreading into a nearby wooded area. Officials remind residents to be cautious with any combustibles, and outdoor burning is discouraged.

The first of three community receptions for South Florida State College presidential candidates will be held this afternoon.

Dr. Amy Bosley, currently the Vice President for Institutional Planning, Development and Chief of Staff at Valencia College will be at the Alan Wildstein Center for the Performing Arts on the Avon Park Campus at 4:00. There, she'll meet with school officials, community leaders and interested residents.

Dr. Bosley is one of three candidates on the short list to replace current SFSC President Dr. Thomas Leitzel when he retires this coming June.

A woman was injured when a trip to McDonald's turned violent in Polk County. Lakeland Police say the 28-year-old was shot yesterday morning outside a McDonald's on Frontage Road. She was taken to the hospital and is in stable condition with serious injuries. Investigators say she was in the drive-thru lane, and Calvin Sousa, who was in the car behind her, became upset with the wait. He started honking his horn, and a man in the woman's minivan got out and started fighting with Sousa. Eventually, the fight stopped and both men got back in their cars. Sousa, though, then allegedly shot at their minivan while leaving the parking lot. He was arrested in Highland City and charged with attempted murder.

April 4

Highlands County commissioners this morning enacted a burn ban for the county. It affects any kind of outdoor burning including yard waste, trash burning or fire pits. Exempted are charcoal grills or gas grills.

The emergency ordinance will be in effect for the next 90-days, or until the summer rains begin. Highlands County currently ranks over 600 on the Keech-Byrum drought index, making it one of the driest in the state.

Commissioners joked that residents should be free to burn by Independence Day.

An upcoming public hearing for median modification safety improvements for Highway 27 has been pushed back. It was to have been held this evening, but has been rescheduled for May 16.

Florida Department of Transportation officials want to meet with the public to introduce proposed changes to five areas from north of Avon Park to north of Lake Placid that have become, what they term, "trouble spots."

The solution to most of them, is to close the pass-through cut outs and make them left-turn only. There's no indication why the meeting was postponed.

A 43-year-old Avon Park man was killed yesterday in a Lake Placid traffic accident. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the biker was riding north on Highway 27, when a dump truck pulled from County Road 17 and into his path.

The motorcycle hit the back of the truck, throwing the rider off the bike. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Troopers say he WAS wearing his helmet.

One person is dead and ten others were injured yesterday morning a crash in Polk County.

That one occurred in the community of Fort Meade at US 98 East and Adams Road. Polk County sheriff's officials say a bus crossed the center line and hit a semi-truck. The bus was carrying 38 strawberry farm workers on their way to Plant City.

One of them died. Nine others in the bus and the truck driver were taken to the hospital, but there's no word on their conditions. There's also no word on what caused the driver to move left of center.

April 5

Fire charred as much as 10 acres of land in the "bird streets" west of Sebring last night. Units from Desoto City and West Sebring were joined by Florida Forest Service crews in battling the stubborn blaze. At this point, they say it currently is 50-percent contained.

Reportedly, the flames came close to a number of homes and businesses, including the Bed & Biscuit Pet Resort. Early indications are that there were no injuries and no property damage.

Forestry crews will be back out again later this morning to finish containment and investigate cause.

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There was an off year election for the Lake Wales City Commission yesterday. Keith Thompson took the Seat 3 race with 53-percent of the vote. Robin Gibson won Seat 5 with 64-percent of the ballots.

A Polk County Walmart employee is facing charges for what Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd calls a BOGO gone horribly and criminally wrong.

Judd announced this week that Raji Nair was arrested for stealing from the store she works at in Mulberry on Church Ave North.

The 36-year-old allegedly went through the self-checkout lane without ringing up all the items she bought.

Investigators say she did this 37 times between November and January and stole almost 400 dollars worth of items.

Judd says this super slow crime spree led to charges that include obtaining property by fraud.

April 6

A man has been arrested in connection with a drive-by shooting in Avon Park, and it didn't take long for Highlands County Sheriff's Deputies to locate a suspect. In fact, authorities say 39-year-old Alfred Maddox Golden was picked up within 15 minutes of an incident at a home on State Road 17 South.

Nobody was injured, however, a vehicle was struck by a round.

According to reports, the victim said Golden had accused him of theft.

A truck believed to belong to Golden subsequently was found on Highway 27 near College Drive, and he was taken into custody. Golden was charged with numerous counts, including attempted first degree murder, and booked into the Highlands County jail.

Motorists be aware, they'll be shutting down the streets of Sebring on and around the Circle tomorrow for the fifth annual SodaFest. Although the festivities

won't begin until tomorrow afternoon, the streets will be shut down at 9:00 tomorrow morning to allow for vendor set-up and other preparations.

The SodaFest features samplings of soft drinks, live music, food vendors a kid's fun zone and Sebring Soda Pop Pre-Teen and Princess Pageants as well.

Some of the activities will be on the Circle, and the Champion for Children Foundation will even unlock the Circle Theatre for a number of activities.

The event will run Friday and Saturday.

Have you ever dialed 9-1-1 by accident? Authorities say if you do, DON'T HANG UP. Apparently hang-ups have become a problem, and officials say to minimize it, residents should remain on the line and just tell the operator it was a mistake.

9-1-1 call takers are trained to get the most important information as quickly as possible to get help on the way to an emergency situation. By holding on the line, it saves the call taker from having to call back and confirm there is no emergency or possibly sending police with lights and sirens to check your address for an emergency.

April 7

Today is Good Friday, one of the Holiest Days on the Christian Calendar. Many government and other offices will be shut down for the observance.

A number of local churches will be holding Good Friday services.

Bible Fellowship and Heartland Christian Church will hold their observances this evening at 6pm, Highlands Community Church will host services at 6:30.

The fifth annual SodaFest gets underway today in downtown Sebring. Although the festivities don't officially start until 2:00 this afternoon, the streets on and around Sebring's Historic Circle were shut down this morning at 9:00 to allow the more than 80 vendors to set up and get ready for the thousands of soft drinkers expected in for the event.

On tap for today will be a Kid's Fun Zone, food, live music, plus Soda Pop Princess and Pre-Teen pageants. Bubble parties will be held this evening.

The festival runs through Saturday.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials are in search of a couple of dogs. The pair, described as pit mixes, are being sought in connection with the death of multiple animals at Park Elementary School in Avon Park this week. Killed there were goats, a chicken and a duck.

Despite repeated sweeps of the area, deputies have not been able to find the dogs.

Apparently, this is not an isolated incident. Citizens are reporting that free-ranging dogs have killed chickens in the Highlands Park community south of Lake Placid.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Highlands County Sheriff's office.

Hardee County officials have joined Highlands County in enacting a burn ban. Outdoor burning of trash or debris is not allowed - and no bonfires, campfires, or fire pits are permitted.

The only exceptions are enclosed gas or charcoal grills. The burn bans will remain in effect for at least 90 days, till the summer rains begin, or they are repealed by the respective commissions.

There are very dry conditions throughout the state. Firefighters have battled over a thousand fires so far this year. That's almost half what Florida had all of last year.

A man is wanted for carjacking a ride-share driver in Polk County. The Polk sheriff's office says Robert Lee Williams stole the driver's car Sunday in Lakeland.

Chris Dunnells was with his 11-year-old son when he picked up Williams on Skyview Drive and Goodyear Ave. They drove for about ten minutes when Williams allegedly pulled a gun and ordered Dunnells to stop and get out.

Deputies say Williams took Dunnell's car, phone and wallet before abandoning the car in Hillsborough County. The 27-year-old Williams is described as white, about six-feet tall with red hair and a bunny tattoo on his leg. Anyone with information on where he is, is asked to contact the sheriff's office.

April 10

A hostage situation turned deadly during the early hours this morning. Not many details have been released about the incident, other than there were two men found dead inside a home in Lake Wales.

Reportedly the two were a local resident and his step-son.

Avon Park city council members will hear about an "Enough is Enough" Rally when they meet in regular session this evening.

A May 6th March is slated to be held from the football field on South Delaney Avenue to the basketball courts at Fred Connor Street. Several shootings have occurred in that area. City officials have responded to citizen requests for additional lighting there.

In other action, the city will look at a request by the Florida Department of Transportation for some additional land near Sun Pure Road. They say the right of way is needed to help put in a traffic signal at the intersection of Highway 27, to facilitate truck traffic at the NuCor plant.

The second of three community receptions for hopefuls looking to become the new president of South Florida State College will be held today. Dr. John M Davis, currently the Vice president of Administrative Services at Germanna College in Locust Grove, Virginia will be feted.

The meet-and-greet for School officials, community leaders, students and interested citizens will be held this afternoon at 4:00 at the Alan Jay Wildstein Center for the performing Arts on SFSC's Avon Park Campus.

It's hard to believe, but people are moving out of Highlands County. But a new report by Stacker found, they didn't move far. Over the past several years the major destination has been Polk County. Hillsborough, Charlotte, Orange and Broward counties round out the five top destinations for those departing Highlands.

In fact, Kent County, Michigan was the top out-of-state destination - that was ranked as number eight, and the only non-Florida destination in the top 10.

April 17

Some heavy weather rumbled through Highlands County overnight. Despite numerous lightning strikes and some reports of hail, Highlands County Sheriff's officials say there was no serious damage reported locally.

Members of the North American Society of Grass Racers and Sod Slingers spent the better part of the weekend dismantling the Mowerplex at the Avon Park airport.

NASGRASS racers and friends loaded up most of the infrastructure including buildings, lights, tire walls, fencing and the like, moving to their new location at the Florida Flywheelers.

The group said that municipal restrictions and requirements made it impossible to continue to race on what was a landfill at Avon Park's airport. It had been the first, for-purpose lawnmower racing facility in the United States.

A new study by Safe Step shows that 21.5-percent of seniors in the Avon Park-Sebring metro area live alone, that is below the national average of 25.7-percent.

Locally, most of those living by themselves are women, which is 65-percent of the estimated 8,000 living solo here. That's only slightly over the national average of 66-percent.

National census data was used for the study.

It looks like Highlands County is getting ready to ditch a bunch of their surplus equipment. County commissioners tomorrow at their regular meeting are expected to waive the two-step procedure and allow Insight Auctioneers to get the highest and best bid for the equipment.

Listed on the manifest are printers, scanners, monitors, file cabinets and laptops among other things.

In other action, commissioners will hold a couple of public hearing on zoning. One would convert 32-acres of property off Desoto City Road from an Agriculture zoning to Medium Density Residential another would convert almost 40-acres off Martin Luther King Boulevard north of Sebring From Agriculture Zoning to a Mobile Home Park District.

April 18

Highlands County Commissioners today confirmed Nicholas Sawyer as the new Deputy County Administrator and Chief of Staff under County Administrator Laurie Hurner.

Commissioner Kevin Roberts objected to the process, saying they were being asked to confirm an employee, who they had no part in selecting.

In other action, commissioners approved a pair of zoning requests, changing two different agricultural tracts to residential designations.

Help is coming to some Polk County residents who live in a food desert. The city of Lake Wales broke ground last week on a community garden near the James P. Austin Community Center. The food grown there will be handed out at local community centers, starting in August.

A specialist with the Community Redevelopment Authority said the closest grocery store is at least two miles away, and there's no place closer where people can get fresh fruits and vegetables.

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April 19

Highlands County commissioners yesterday discussed setting rules and fees for the operation of the concession stand at the Highlands County sports complex.

Apparently, some residents have come forward, wanting to use the facility during certain events.

Efforts to get a vendor to operate the facility in the past have been largely unsuccessful - inasmuch as operators said it was unprofitable.

There will be different rates for profit and non-profit groups.

It appears that when it comes to credit card fraud, the Avon Park-Sebring metro area is pretty high on the list. A new Report by the firm "Upgraded Points" shows Highlands is 13th highest on a review of small metro areas in the United States.

The analysis found that there were 12.7-percent credit card fraud reports per 10,000 residents here. That was up 104-percent over last year. The three year percentage was even worse, with nearly a 15-percent average of credit card fraud locally over the past three years.

Despite recent rains, Highlands County fire officials are warning residents this still is the dry season, and the chance for grassfires, brush fires and wildfires remains high. They recommend that residents take this opportunity to clean debris and flammable materials from their roofs and around their homes.

Authorities note that airborne embers from wildfires - and even controlled burns - can ignite fires in other places.

The five foot area around a house is known as the "fire ignition zone."

A burn ban remains in effect in Highlands County.

April 20

It appears that if there's an emergency, people will know about it. An emergency alert test went out this morning over cell phones across the country shortly after 4:30. The early morning tone alert startled lots of people, and some have received the notification more than once.

However, this was only a test. Had it been an actual alert, information about the situation would have followed.

A student with a gun was found yesterday at the Avon Park High School. According to reports, school resource officers were following up on an off campus incident that apparently had involved some Red Devil high school students.

In the course of their investigation, deputies looked through a backpack belonging to Jaedon Xavier Webber. There, they found a 9mm handgun and two fully loaded magazines.

The 19-year-old student reportedly was combative with deputies and was arrested on counts of battery on a law enforcement officer, resisting arrest and possession of a weapon on a school campus.

They say at no time were there any threats against the school itself.

A tough one for West Sebring and Highlands Lakes firefighters yesterday as they were called out to battle a muck fire. The blaze charred about five acres of property off Thompson Road - east of the community of Alpine - north of Avon Park.

So far, there's no indication what caused the fire. No injuries were reported and no structures were damaged.

A new law in Polk County is designed to reduce traffic deaths. The county commission yesterday made it illegal for pedestrians to linger in a median or interact with people in cars.

Polk County Commission Chairman George Lindsey said the ordinance is intended to decrease the number of fatalities and injuries on roadways. Violations could lead to fines of between 25 and 500 dollars. A three-time offender could get up to 60 days in jail.

Highlands County has a measure prohibiting panhandling on Highway 27 or its feeder roads.

April 21

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say they again are being used in a local scam. The perpetrators are using the names of actual deputies, claiming residents have missed jury duty and now there is a warrant out for their arrest.

BUT, if you pay them - in gift cards or Bitcoin - the problem will go away. THIS IS A SCAM.

First of all, Highlands County Sheriff's deputies rarely call anyone - rather, they stop by for a visit. Secondly, they NEVER ask for money.

Authorities say always check such claims with the Highlands County Clerk of Courts. And NEVER give out money or personal information.

Members of the Highlands Beekeepers this weekend will be checking on an experiment. The idea is to eliminate a common problem, with a different kind of bait. In order to deal with the issue of small hive beetles, the beekeepers will use beer to lure them to their doom.

Apparently, they will use five different varieties to see which will work best. Most polled believe the beetles would enjoy a nice IPA brew.

This weekend, beekeepers will don their suits to see which beer is the most productive.

Small Hive Beetles can take over a hive in a matter of 2 or 3 weeks. Like a military invasion, they destroy the bees' homes, plunder their goods, kill their loved ones, and force them to abandon their own hives.

Usually known for the Red Devils, Avon Park will be blue this weekend. That's because the 12th Annual Rotary Bluegrass & Blueberry Festival will take over Donaldson Park tomorrow from 10-4. In addition to a wide variety of fresh blueberries and blueberry products, there will be arts & crafts vendors and plenty of music.

Headlining the show will be The Highway 41 band.

A state corrections officer is accused of threatening a Polk County Sheriff's deputy. Polk Correctional Institution Sergeant Sean Teehan allegedly made the threat after being arrested for drunk driving.

The Dundee resident was arrested after crashing his car into a guardrail in Lake Wales.

The 31-year-old was taken to the hospital, and while he was being discharged, he allegedly told a Polk County Sheriff's deputy 'your time is coming,' 'I'll see you on the inside,' and 'I work for the DOC.' Teehan was then charged with threatening a public servant.

April 24

It appears a long and tedious chapter of Avon Park may be over tonight, as city council members look at approving the sale of the Brickell Building. Sauls Real

Estate made the original proposal on the structure back in February of last year, with a three-year build out agreement.

The Brickell now is slated to have a gym, a coffee shop and the Sauls Real Estate headquarters.

In other action this evening, the council will look at insurance requirements for the Historical Society of Avon Park for the use of the Depot museum and will make plans for Independence Day.

Desoto City firefighters got called out over the weekend to extinguish a brush fire off State Road 66. Apparently, the blaze in a wooded area was sparked by a car fire.

So far, there's no details on what may have caused the vehicle's fuel cell to rupture. No injuries were reported and no structures apparently were threatened.

A Wauchula man was killed Saturday in a Hardee County traffic accident. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a sport utility vehicle driven by a Bowling Green woman hit a man that had gotten out of his disabled vehicle.

The car apparently had stopped in the road on Highway 17 near the intersection with Earnest Road.

The 28-year-old victim was dead at the scene. No charges have been filed. The incident remains under investigation.

Frostproof town council members will gather this evening for a workshop to discuss the possible implementation of a permit process for parking at Lake Clinch. The beachfront is a popular place - especially during the summer months. Council members say such a process could relieve parking problems there.

Highlands Beekeepers gathered over the weekend to assess their experiment to see how beer might be used to lure small hive beetles to their doom.

Apparently, things didn't go well. All the traps were fully evaporated and half had not attracted a single beetle. Beekeepers say they will re-think their approach and try a different variety of attractants.

A search is underway to find the driver involved in a deadly hit-and-run in Polk County. Polk County sheriff's officials announced yesterday a male bicyclist was killed Saturday after getting hit by a car near Winter Haven at SR 540 and Thornhill Road.

Deputies say a witness told them the car was a gray or dark-colored sedan. It may have damage on its front-end and a side window. Anyone with information is asked to contact the sheriff's office or Heartland Crime Stoppers Florida.

April 25

In what was described as a largely ceremonial vote, Avon Park city council members last night approved the sale of the Brickel Building to Sauls Realty. The building, which had been vacant for decades, now houses a gym and the Sauls real estate office. Reportedly, they still are looking for a vendor to start a coffee shop there.

The council also rolled back insurance requirements from a \$5-million to a \$1-million dollar policy for the Historical Society of Avon Park. That, for their use of the Depot Museum downtown.

Apparently, the higher policy figure was cost prohibitive for the group.

Students with developmental disabilities are finding jobs thanks to a program in Polk County. Project SEARCH graduated its latest class yesterday at Lakeland Regional Health. Students were taught the skills they need to find work, and they were also given job placement assistance.

Nineteen-year-old Jacob Clemens is one of the graduates, and he'll be starting work in the LRH operating room as a surgery clerk. He tells ABC Action News he's extremely excited to start this new chapter.

April 26

A bicyclist was injured in a hit & run accident west of Sebring yesterday. Apparently, the motorist did not stop. A van, driven by a 30-year-old Sebring man, reportedly clipped the bike from behind on Heron Street. The impact tossed the 16-year-old cyclist off the bike.

He was taken to the hospital in critical condition. According to witnesses, Florida Highway Patrol troopers later stopped a van on nearby Thunderbird Road. Troopers say the driver of the van was arrested and charged with leaving the scene of an accident. He was taken to the Highlands County jail.

One person was killed and another seriously injured yesterday in a three-vehicle tangle in Hardee County. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a semi tractor-trailer rig was eastbound on State Road 62 near North County Road 663. The big rig went left of center and slammed into a sport utility vehicle.

The driver of the SUV, a 31-year-old Bowling Green man, was killed. The semi then ran into the parking lot of the Country Food & Beverage Store and hit a parked car.

The trucker reportedly was seriously injured. That accident remains under investigation.

Polk County Sheriff's detectives are investigating the death of a jail inmate, who expired at AdventHealth Sebring. According to reports, 43-year-old Doreeto Martinez Castro was being held on counts of DUI-Manslaughter at the medical unit of the Polk County jail, in connection with an April 22nd fatal traffic crash.

Deputies say Martinez-Castro became unresponsive, and was taken to AdventHealth Sebring where he died. A subsequent examination found he'd expired from accident-related internal injuries.

Martinez-Castro was in the country illegally, and had been twice deported in the past.

A Polk County couple knows what it takes to have a long and happy marriage. Vic and Marge Gerard celebrated their 80th wedding anniversary yesterday in Haines City. He's 101, and she's 98. They have six kids, 13 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Vic says the secret is being lucky, being honest and taking care of each other.

April 27

There was a traffic-related fatality outside Avon Park yesterday, however the details remain unclear. An eastbound van ran off Highway 17, into an orange grove, striking several trees.

It's unknown if the driver, said to have been an elderly man, was killed by the impact - or might have had a medical episode prior to the crash.

Florida Highway Patrol officials have not yet released a report on the incident.

Another Blue-Green Algae alert for Highlands County. Local health officials say testing has discovered the toxic growth on the western shores of Lake Blue and at the Lake Apthorpe boat ramp.

Residents are cautioned not to use those waters for swimming, boating, or other sorts of recreational activities. They also advise to keep pets away from the area - and don't drink it - or eat shellfish caught from those waters.

The city of Avon Park could be in line for a half-million dollar grant to repair the Lakeside Historical Cemetery. Hobe Sound consultant Matt Davis has been working on the project, but he says he's hit a roadblock in finding out who owns the property.

Davis asked the city council for a quit claim deed, however, City Attorney Gerald Buhr balked - saying there's no indication the city owns it - and they cannot give away somebody else's land.

Buhr asked for a charter for the organization working on the project - in case the group dissolves.

Polk County is taking action after reporting an increase in mosquito-borne disease activity. The Florida Department of Health in Polk County announced this week that two horses tested positive for Eastern equine encephalitis, or Triple-E. This means the risk of transmission to people has increased.

Polk County Mosquito Control is spraying the area where the horses lived, and dozens of mosquito traps have been set.

Interim Manager Dr. Jackson Mosley said residents can help by eliminating breeding sites, like standing water, around their homes.

Florida is maintaining its position as the global leader in the new space economy. That's what Governor DeSantis said yesterday during his visit to South Korea.

He signed a Memorandum of Understanding with a company called LowCarbon Hydrogen Corporation. The two will build a research hub in Polk County for clean hydrogen technology for aerospace and space industry launch applications.

DeSantis says this is a bold step toward promoting long-term development in the aerospace and space industry across the entire supply chain.

April 28

A new report shows that when it comes to production - this area is at the bottom. The new analysis by Smartest Dollar found that the that out of all small US metro areas surveyed, the Avon Park-Sebring area has the lowest Gross Domestic Product per capita.

The local figure of \$28,000 per resident is dwarfed by the national average of over \$70,000 per person. The GDP is the value of all goods and services produced in an economy.

The survey showed that the personal income per capita here is over \$41,000 while nationally it tops \$64,000.

While Highlands County school officials look to fill dozens of teacher vacancies, local union officials are warning upper management of the low morale in the system. Highlands County Education Association representative Jean Frederico told the board and Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore, that there are teachers deciding not to return to the classroom because they feel "battered," and "nobody is listening."

Parent and local businessman Jesse Sapp had previously given a similar warning - noting the results of a recent teacher survey.

Heavy weather again rumbled through Highlands County overnight. Local law enforcement officials say they got calls from some frightened residents, however,

other than some lawn furniture and other outside stuff being blown about - there were no injuries or serious damage reported.

Those who rely on a Polk County flea market for extra income are feeling the impact of a storm earlier this week.

Rain and hail fell Wednesday in Lake Wales at the Sunshine Flea Market. Some vendors say all their merchandise was destroyed.

The property owner says it could take a week or two before the market can reopen. One vendor is trying to be optimistic. She says they're starting over from nothing, but with God's help, they'll be able to rebuild.

May 1

It appears the spring infestation of love bugs is getting started locally. Reports are coming in about seeing the initial blush of the bugs - flying united - this past weekend. It's unclear how many will be around this time - and how long the season might last. However, dry weather may keep the population down.

Residents are reminded to keep the bug residue off their cars - as it may hurt the finish. Apparently, they are drawn by auto exhaust - so they will be around the roadways.

You may have seen an orange fireball in the sky last night. That was the Falcon Heavy rocket launched at Cape Canaveral by SpaceX.

The launch originally had been set for last Wednesday, but weather and other issues caused plans to change. It was carrying communications satellites to geostationary orbit.

Blastoff and watching the rocket could easily be seen from Highlands and Polk counties.

It should be a short meeting for Frostproof city council members this evening. The only agenda'd items are a lighting maintenance agreement and some wastewater treatment issues.

At a special meeting last week, the council got together to discuss the issuing of permits to park at Lake Clinch. That, in an effort to relieve overcrowding at the popular municipal beach there.

A man is custody after a shooting in Polk County. Three people, all males, including a minor, were hurt in Saturday night's shooting in Auburndale at a home on Allred Drive.

Police have arrested Xavier Rakim Roberts. The 26-year-old is charged with aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.

Authorities say an ongoing neighborhood feud led to the shooting.

One victim was an innocent bystander. One victim has been released from the hospital. The other two are still hospitalized but police say they're in good condition.

There was a big birthday celebration yesterday at the Center for Great Apes in Wauchula. Bubbles the Chimp has turned 40 years old. Bubbles might best be known as the former companion of the late "King of Pop" Michael Jackson.

Officials at the center say Bubbles got an "ape-healthy" birthday cake made with bananas and blueberries. Bubbles has been a resident of the sanctuary since 2005.

In his retirement, Bubbles has become the dominant ape in his group, and enjoys painting.

May 2

There were some scary moments around Lake Placid yesterday as a brush fire there charred more than 25 acres - threatening several homes in the area. A number were evacuated as firefighters worked to stop the flames. Units from Leisure Lakes, Placid Lakes, Sun 'N Lake south and Lake Placid were joined by Florida Forestry crews in the effort.

The blaze now said to be 90-percent contained and Forestry crews will be out again later this morning to check on it. No injuries were reported. No cause for the fire has yet been released.

Despite recent rains, a burn ban remains in effect for Highlands County.

Highlands County commissioners this morning took action on a couple of traffic issues. They first approved a agreement to improve County Road 64 from South Angelo Lake to East Butler Road - that will cost nearly \$1.2 million dollars.

They also voted to widen the Catfish Creek Road bridge Road. That will cost nearly \$400,000.

During a special break, commissioners dedicated the new centennial mural, hanging in the foyer of the Government Center.

There's a new scam that targets the relatives of alleged criminals. According to Highlands County Sheriff's officials, when an arrest is made, the relatives of the arrestee are contacted by somebody claiming to be a bail bondsman.

They're not. After filling out paperwork and submitting a fee, the scammer runs off with the money and no bail is posted.

Apparently, one red flag is that scammers are using CashApp to get the money. Those dealing with the justice system are urged to only use only actual bail bondsmen for that service.

Local officials say it has not yet occurred here in Highlands County - but residents need to be aware of the possibility.

The governor's recent trip to Asia could pay big dividends for Polk County. While in South Korea last week, Governor Ron DeSantis signed a Memorandum of Understanding with LowCarbon Hydrogen Corporation.

The MoU calls for the company to build a hydrogen plant in Mulberry at Old Highway 37. It's expected to make rocket fuel and employ 150 people at an average salary of 60-thousand dollars a year. A groundbreaking ceremony is set for next month. County Commissioner George Lindsey says it will add to the local tax base, employment base, and a better quality of life.

Highlands County commissioners will take a break from their meeting at 10:00 this morning, to dedicate the new centennial mural - recently hung in the foyer of the Highlands County Government Center.

Created by internationally-known artist Keith Goodson, it honors citrus & cattle, the racing and aviation history of the county as well as all three communities.

In other action, commissioners will receive the annual comprehensive financial report for the county.

May 3

South Florida State College appears to have been the victim of a so-called swatting call yesterday. Authorities say they occurred across the Sunshine State.

The Highlands County Sheriff's Office received a call claiming there had been a shooting on the Highlands Campus.

SFSC's college resource officer responded to the scene and determined that NO SHOOTING had occurred. Deputies also responded to the campus and cleared the scene.

SFSC was one of a number South Florida colleges and universities that got such calls. They also occurred in Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties. All the calls were found to be hoaxes.

No arrest has been announced, and it's not clear if the calls are connected.

South Florida State College Trustees are slated to get together for a special meeting today. At issue there will be the selection of a new president, to replace outgoing chief Thomas Leitzel. He is slated to step down next month.

College officials had narrowed a short list to three candidates. However, according to reports, all of them now have pulled their resumes. It appears that Governor Ron Desantis' office instead has contacted the school with a recommendation for the top post.

Trustees will discuss the issue at today's session.

Highlands County commissioners took action on a couple of traffic issues when they met in regular session yesterday. They first approved an agreement to improve County Road 64 from South Angelo Lake to East Butler Road - that project will cost nearly \$1.2 million dollars.

They also voted to widen the Catfish Creek Road bridge. That work is slated to cost nearly \$400,000.

During a special break, commissioners dedicated the new centennial mural for the county. It's now hanging in the foyer of the Government Center.

Lake Wales police say they have located a suspect in connection with a fatal shooting incident and are trying to take him into custody. 38-year-old Al Joseph Stenson is wanted on first degree murder counts in connection with the shooting death of a mother and her three children.

Apparently, two of the siblings are adults. According to reports, the incident happened early yesterday morning at the Sunrise Apartments - but the bodies were not discovered until last night.

Victims names and other details have not yet been released.

It's already pretty dry out there. Highlands and a number of surrounding counties enacted burn bans last month in response. Now, The National Weather Service has issued a Fire Weather Watch for today including Polk, Brevard, Lake, Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Sumter, and Volusia counties.

Weather authorities say high winds and low relative humidity could spread fires rapidly. Outdoor burning is not recommended.

A brush fire in Lake Placid near Lake Apthorpe charred some 80 acres on Monday. No cause for that one has been released.

May 4

It's the first Thursday of May, and that means it's the observance of the National Day of Prayer. This will be the 29th ceremony to be held here in Highlands County. It will commence this morning at 11am on the East Lawn of the Highlands County Courthouse in downtown Sebring. There will be music and remarks by local pastors and elected officials.

The ceremony will run about a half hour. Residents may bring their own chairs, or use some of the seating already set up at the site.

Following the observance, the First Church in Sebring will hold a Prayer Luncheon. That will be held at the church home on Pine Street in Sebring. Highlands County Sheriff Paul Blackman will be the guest speaker there.

For those who miss this morning's observance, the Hardee County Ministerial Association will have a ceremony this evening at 6pm in Heritage Park in Wauchula.

The City of Frostproof also will hold a Community Observance of the National Day of Prayer - that will be conducted at the Frostproof City Hall. It's also at 6pm.

A man wanted in connection with a Lake Wales murder is dead. Al Joseph Stenson was shot by officers in Seminole County.

The 38-year-old Stenson was killed yesterday morning in Sanford after a six-hour standoff at the Slumberland Motel.

Stenson had been sought in the death his girlfriend and her three children Tuesday in Lake Wales.

Seminole County Sheriff Dennis Lemma says SWAT team negotiators got Stenson to come out of his motel room, but as they were taking him into custody, he reached for a gun and was shot by four officers.

The victims have not been identified, but police say the woman is 40-years-old, and her children are 21, 17 and 11.

A pair of Frostproof correctional officers have been arrested in connection with an investigation into a hit & run incident. According to reports, officers 26-year-old Michael Granger and 29-year-old Leila Chaney were arrested as was Granger's father, 63-year-old Michael Granger.

Apparently, the elder Granger was at the wheel of a car that flipped and rolled into an orange grove off South Lake Patrick Road.

The vehicle is co-owned by Chaney and the younger Granger. Chaney is charged with lying to officers about the accident. Both Chaney and the younger Granger work at the Avon Park Correctional Institution.

May 5

The Liqui-Moly Pro Watercross National Tour will kick off their 2023 racing season in Sebring tomorrow. The jet-skis and personal watercraft will be running at 85 miles-per-hour or better on a liquid track set out in Lake Jackson.

Competitors will be using Veterans Beach Park for the event, which gets underway tomorrow in earnest with practice and qualifying starting at 9am.

Team haulers and watercraft already have started arriving for the competition, which will run tomorrow and Sunday. It's being filmed for broadcast on CBS Sports.

Those interested can view the competition at no charge.

A camper reportedly was destroyed in the Tanglewood community west of Sebring yesterday when a refrigerator malfunctioned. Reportedly the camper was fully involved in flames when West Sebring firefighters arrived at Wilderness Circle.

There were no injuries in the incident.

May 8

Five people were arrested Friday after a shooting incident in Highlands County. An unidentified victim was shot near a Dollar General store at State Road 66 and South Orange Blossom Blvd. south of Sebring.

Within minutes, a red Ford 500, observed at the scene of the shooting, was located in Hardee County. Deputies there gave chase until the vehicle crashed in Wauchula.

Taken into custody were Trinton Alexander Lee, Junior Louis, Zikevious Knowles, and Daniel Mabry. Reportedly they face numerous charges including attempted murder. A fifth suspect, Jasiah Sison is being held on violation of probation.

The victim at last report was in critical condition at an unnamed trauma center. There's no indication as to what sparked the shooting.

Units from West Sebring and Highlands Lakes were called out yesterday to put down a brush fire off Riverdale Road in the north end of Highlands County. The flames consumed about three acres of vegetation before they finally got it knocked down.

There were no injuries reported and no structures were threatened. Cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Residents are reminded that a burn ban remains in effect for Highlands County until the summer rains cure the currently dry conditions.

Avon Park city council members will be planning for the future when they get together this evening in regular session. They're scheduled to hear from Stephen Johnson of Renaissance Planning about a proposed project on Main Street that would slow traffic and provide for more parking.

The council also will look at awarding a bid for a firm to review fire assessment fees for the City of Charm. Only one firm responded to an ad - Stantec. They have been performing that duty for Avon Park since 2019.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies, local elected officials and interested citizens gathered this morning at the Highlands County Sheriff's headquarters to honor the fallen.

Highlands County Chairman Chris Campbell was the keynote speaker. Honored were ten officers killed in the line of duty in 2022.

Locally, deputies paid tribute the memory of Deputy William Gentry jr. He died 5 years ago yesterday while going to investigate a neighborhood dispute.

This morning's observance was held in front of the Highlands County Sheriff's office.

May 9

Declining attendance and rising costs have spelled the end of the Heartland Triathlon. Organizers have announced they've pulled the plug on this year's event - which was to have run next month.

The triathlon involved running, swimming and bicycling competitions throughout the Greater Sebring area - causing swaths of downtown - as well as parts of the Alan Altvader Complex to be closed in favor of competitors.

The event had run for 18 years.

Avon Park city officials will be joined by representatives of Renaissance Planning this afternoon for another public information meeting on a plan to revamp Main Street in the City of Charm. Consultants last night introduced a plan that could significantly change the traffic patterns there.

Suggested were such things as traffic chicanes to slow vehicles and back-in angle parking along certain zones of Main Street. It's all part of a planned Resurfacing, Restoration and Rehabilitation project.

The public information program will be held from 4 until 5:30 this afternoon at the Jacaranda Hotel in downtown Avon Park.

Highlands County officials are hoping to use social media to instruct citizens on the annual budget process. They will be sharing a 12-part series of educational posts on how the system works.

It's called "a beginner's look at how the process unfolds..."

Over the past few months, each director has met with department staff and Office of Management & Budget to review spending and cost control measures in developing a department budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

Currently, County departments are in the review process.

Authorities say the entire series ultimately will be posted on the county's Facebook page.

Two Haines City men were killed yesterday in a traffic accident in Lake Wales. Police say a 2017 Cadillac driven by Aljurme Brooks ran the traffic light at Highway 27 and Washington Avenue, slamming into a semi-truck like vehicle referred to as a "yard dog."

Both Brooks and his passenger, Javacea Morton were pronounced dead at the scene. A third passenger was transported to the hospital.

The truck apparently is owned by the Florida Natural orange processing facility and is used to move equipment around the yard. It was driven by a Frostproof man. He apparently was not seriously injured.

Some sick horses are getting the help they need in Polk County. Seven horses seized from Tianvica [[tee-ahn-VEE-kuh]] Riding Academy in Bartow were sent yesterday to Hope Equine Rescue in Winter Haven. Sara Montijo-Lopez was the academy's executive director, and she was arrested for allegedly mistreating the horses.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd said if Montijo-Lopez goes to prison, she'll be taken care of and fed, unlike what she did for the horses. The Tianvica Riding Academy is now closed.

May 10

Members of the South Florida State College Board of Trustees will gather this morning to try again to find a replacement for outgoing school president Thomas Leitzel. The process was thrown into chaos earlier this month when all three of the candidates on a short list pulled their resumes for consideration for the post.

A new slate of finalists is expected to be approved at this morning's meeting - with the subsequent establishment of a visitation and interview schedule for the hopefuls.

Leitzel is expected to step down next month.

It appears there will be big doings in Avon Park on Independence Day. Sherry and Shane Eason of Heartland Helping Hands recieved the blessing of the city council to stage the Inaugural Firecracker Festival at Donaldson Park on July Fourth.

The preliminary schedule would include games for the kids, food trucks and music. The highlight of the day would be the first ever Miss Firecracker Pageant. Details on that and other planned activities now are under consideration.

An illegal alien reportedly has been charged in connection with yesterday's double fatal in Mullberry. A man identified as 24-year-old Elmer Bryah Giron-Canil, a Guatamalan citizen, has been charged with numerous counts in the mishap.

Canil is said to have been at the wheel of a sport utility vehile that hit a pickup truck on Highway 60.

Polk County Sheriff's officials says four people in the SUV were ejected. One died at the scene. Another person died at Lakeland Regional.

The 18-year-old woman driving the pickup was injured. She's a senior at Bartow High School.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd says she was on her way to school at the time. She and another person were air-lifted to Tampa General Hospital.

There's no word on their conditions, but Judd says their injuries were serious. Four others are hospitalized at Lakeland Regional. Judd says there's a possibility a third person may not survive.

May 11

It appears that the scrambling for a president for South Florida State College is over. Officials at the SFSC Board of Trustees yesterday announced Osceola County state lawmaker Fred Hawkins as the only finalist to be their president.

The 55-year-old Hawkins represents the 42nd District in St. Cloud in the Florida House.

He first was elected to the state legislature in 2020 after 12 years on the Osceola County Commission.

Current SFSC President Thomas Leitzel will step down the first of June.

Avon Park city officials are getting ready for a new fire assessment for homes and businesses in the City of Charm. By law, a study must be done every five years, to make certain that numbers are current to determine charges.

Without comment, council members have approved Stantec to do the work. The firm has done a similar study for the city in the past. Their \$42,000 bid came in over budget, but city staff assured council members they could make up the shortfall.

Hardee County commissioners will gather this morning for a visioning session. The board will look at a 2012 Visioning report, and hear from County Manager Terry Atchley, Central Florida Regional Planning Council Representative Jeneffer Codo-Salsbury and others about how Hardee might develop in the future.

Citizens also will be given an opportunity to weigh-in on their ideas. That session will commence this morning at 8:30 in the Hardee County commission chamber in Wauchula.

Lake Wales City Commissioner Kristen Tieshia Fitzgerald has been restored to her seat. According to reports, Florida Governor DeSantis has revoked a July 2021 an Executive Order - suspending Fitzgerald from her position.

The action comes in the wake of Fitzgerald's acquittal on charges of interference with the custody of a child.

Fitzgerald will receive full back pay and other allowances as part of the action. She replaces Daniel Krueger, who was elected to the Commission Seat 4 last May.

May 12

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May 15

An Avon Park couple reportedly were killed in a weekend traffic crash in Glades County. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the 72-year-old man was on a motorcycle north on State Road 29 with a rider, when a sport utility vehicle driven by a Melbourne woman went left of center and slammed head-on into the bike.

Both he and his passenger, a 71-year-old Avon Park woman, were pronounced dead at the scene. No names have been released. The incident remains under investigation.

If you normally take Hammock Road, today's the day you're going to be taking a different route. County officials will be closing that heavily traveled thoroughfare between Lakewood and Brunns roads, so a new drainage culvert can be installed.

Local officials say they hope the work will be done and the road back open a week from Friday. In the meantime, motorists are urged to plan a little extra time to get where they're going.

You might want to think about changing your password. A new report from Upgraded Points shows that there have been more than 25 identity theft reports per each 10,000 members of the population in the Avon Park/Sebring metro area in 2022. That represents a 15-percent increase over 2019.

It's still well below the national average of 33.4-percent.

Officials attribute it to the high number of people applying for government benefits coupled with the government's rush to distribute them. That created vulnerabilities in the system that criminals were able to exploit.

It appears a weekend argument cost an Orlando woman her life. According to reports, 27-year-old Lataysha Rene Kelley had stopped her car along Chalet Suzanne Road just north of Lake Wales during an argument with a male passenger in the vehicle.

The tiff spread onto the roadway, where Kelly was hit by an oncoming vehicle. She was taken to the hospital where she later expired from her injuries.

A man is dead after a wrong-way crash in Polk County. The sheriff's office says Garry Restifo of Lake Wales was going the wrong way on a motorcycle Saturday night when he hit a pickup truck on Highway 27 in Dundee.

The 60-year-old was taken to the hospital where he passed away. Deputies say he was not wearing a helmet. No one in the pickup truck was seriously hurt.

A man is dead after an ATV Crash near Lakeland. It happened Saturday night on Wildlife Trail.

The sheriff's office says Lakeland's Roger Tyer, Jr. was riding an ATV when it flipped and landed on top of him. The 35-year-old was pinned under the ATV for about half-an-hour before someone found him and called 911. He was taken to the hospital where he passed away.

May 16

An Avon Park Middle School teenager was killed yesterday when he was hit by a train. 13-year-old Malik K. Pearson was struck by a northbound Amtrak passenger train. It happened after school near the Bell Street crossing.

Apparently, Pearson was walking by the tracks near Feagin Avenue when he was hit. So far there's no detail on exactly how the accident occurred.

Highlands County school officials say there are counsellors at the Avon Park Middle School today.

Highlands County commissioners this morning voted to increase the solid waste collection fee to \$222 a year. Commissioners say they are looking toward the construction of a new cell at the existing landfill and the possible change of a collection service - all of which soon will be costing the taxpayers more money.

It passed by a 4-1 margin.

Commissioners then passed a preliminary seven percent hike on the fire assessment for homes and businesses across the county. That will come back for final approval in July.

That also passed 4-1.

A Florida Department of Transportation community meeting originally slated for this past April, will be held tonight. At issue are a number of troubling intersections along Highway 27. The spots of concern stretch from River Greens north of Avon Park to the Lake Francis Road intersection north of Lake Placid.

In most cases, the idea is to make the intersections right-turn-only, disallowing people to cross the busy road to make a left turn.

Tonight's session will be held at the Bert J. Harris Agricultural Civic Center from 5-6pm.

It appears a Lake Wales man may have died behind the wheel yesterday, causing a three car tangle on Highway 27 near Washington Avenue. Lake Wales police say a Chevy panel van driven by 75-year-old Thomas Wulff slammed into the back of a Nissan Sentra, that was stopped for the traffic light there.

The Nissan was pushed into the back of a Chrysler Voyager stopped in front of her. Neither the Nissan driver, 20-year-old Jazmia McDonald of Avon Park, nor the Chrysler driver were seriously injured.

Wulff was taken to Advent Hospital Lake Wales where he expired. Witnesses say he was weaving an unresponsive prior to the mishap.

Foul play is not suspected in the death of a baby found in a dumpster in Polk County. Lakeland Police yesterday released the medical examiner's preliminary findings.

The baby was stillborn with a brain deformity, and its death was not the result of a homicide.

Police also say the 34-year-old mother came forward and admitted to putting the baby in the dumpster.

Brusela D'Enstachio-Lugo told police she's an illegal immigrant, didn't know she was pregnant and was afraid to go to the hospital. She's facing charges and Homeland Security has been contacted.

May 17

Overriding objections of Highlands County Commissioner Don Elwell, the board of commissioners agreed by consensus to pursue another penny on the dollar tax on tourists visiting Highlands County.

Elwell had objected to the lack of a plan for the money, noting that if a facility were built, tourists might pay for construction - however, local residents could be on the hook for maintenance.

He also asked about the rush to getting the issue approved - noting that after July 1st, the matter instead would go to a voter referendum, allowing local residents to have their say on the matter.

The issue will be up again before the commissioners at their next meeting.

Highlands County Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore and school board members got another report from an unhappy parent last night about the failures of the local system. Parent Jesse Sapp brought forward numbers from the district showing that test scores in English reading & writing for eighth graders at the Lake Placid Middle School are concerning.

Of 189 students tested, 102 were at Level one - which is the lowest. Sapp said it appears that Lake Placid Middle School also has jumped ahead in teacher vacancies.

At last report, there were more than 80 teacher vacancies across the district, with another 60 substitute teachers in the classrooms on a continuing basis.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say they have arrested an Avon Park man in connection with a trio of shooting incidents in the City of Charm. According to reports, 23-year-old Austin Tillman Demery has been charged with numerous counts including three counts of attempted murder.

He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

A woman in the United States illegally reportedly has come forward in connection with an infant found in a Lakeland Dumpster. According to reports, the woman, identified as Brusela D'Enstachio-Lugo, told police she did not know she was pregnant and thought she was just sick.

She said she had afraid to go to the hospital afterward because she was in the country illegally and did not want to get in trouble. She also said she did not have any money to pay the medical expenses.

D'Enstachio-Lugo's country of origin has not been released.

The infant reportedly was stillborn and later was put into a dumpster. The 34-year-old D'Enstachio-Lugo has been charged with transportation of human remains. The incident remains under investigation.

May 18

Officials from Highlands County's tourism sector yesterday unrolled their proposal for the addition of another cent to the local tourist tax. Apparently, they are looking to expand the county's ballfield complex, and want to add yet another tourism asset, described as a "multi-use facility."

Although the ballfields generate only about a third of what it takes to maintain them, during a county commission meeting Tuesday, it was revealed that tourist tax money can be used for maintenance costs.

A full report is slated to be released later this month.

Fire officials in Sebring are investigating the cause of a roof collapse on the Historic Circle in downtown Sebring. Workers at Sebring Subs say they heard a loud bang, and saw the panel ceiling above them fold downward.

Workers and customers fled, shaken but unharmed. Apparently, there had been some work being done on the second floor, but it remains unclear as to what caused the incident.

Sebring Mayor John Shoop has called for a workshop to discuss the future of the Alan Altvader Cultural Complex and the stalled Waterfront District. He noted the city has received letters from both the Highlands Art League and the Sebring Historical Society asking for long term leases on the Weigle House and the Clavelli House, which front Lakeview Drive.

Shoop says it is time to decide whether to develop a long term plan or bulldoze the structures. Council agreed to have such a confab in the next few weeks. No date was set.

Today is May 18th, and that's International Museum Day. A half-dozen local facilities will participate in the observance with specially-conducted tours, receptions, presentations and exhibits.

The Children's Museum in Sebring will have free entry from 4-7 this evening for open play. Lake Placid's Historic Depot Museum will have an open house from 4-6 this evening, The Military Sea Services Museum in Sebring will have extended Hours as will the Museum of Florida Art & Culture at South Florida State College and the Peter Powell Roberts Museum in Avon Park.

May 22

It will be a lot of housekeeping work for Avon Park city council members when they meet in regular session this evening. They'll look at final approval for ordinances on docks, boat houses accessory structures and fences.

They'll also hear a handful of requests for code enforcement fee reductions. In other action, new Avon Park Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kamela Long has asked to formally introduce herself to the council.

Lake Placid town council members took action to fill a couple of upcoming vacancies at a special Friday night session. They moved to make Lake Placid Police Captain Mark Schneider the new chief when current chief James Fansler steps down at the end of the month.

They also appointed Assistant Town Administrator & Engineer Joe Barber to be the new town administrator with the retirement of Phil Williams. Council will revisit the appointments in August to see if they should be made permanent.

Highlands County officials say they are trying to fill out a number of committees. There are vacancies on Highlands County Health Facilities Authority, the Historic Preservation Committee, the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee, the Natural Resources Advisory Commission and the Dangerous Dog Hearing Board.

Applications are available through the county online, or by visiting the Highlands County Government Center in downtown Sebring.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials have made another arrest in connection with a shooting incident in Avon Park. Virgil Corey Cooper jr has been implicated in the incident along with co-defendant, 23-year-old Austin Tillman Demery.

Both are believed to have been involved in a May 14th shooting incident near Hawk's Grocery on Hal MacRae Blvd. Apparently, Cooper suffered gunshot wounds and had to be flown to Tampa for treatment.

A multiple agency investigation has resulted in drug charges against a Sebring man. Nichiren Soshu Smith has been charged with possession of a structure where drugs are trafficked and possession of a weapon by a convicted felon.

Members of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Crime Suppression Unit, along with the Sebring Police Department and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement raided Smith's Shirley Street Home.

They recovered cocaine, marijuana, cash and a stolen handgun. The 47-year-old Smith was booked into the Highlands County jail.

A man is facing charges after a shooting in Lake Wales. Darius Scarlett was arrested Saturday after the incident in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

Polk County Sheriff's officials say the 33-year-old admitted to being in a rage before he shot the victim. Scarlett apparently told investigators the victim hit him when he tried to break up a fight between the victim and Scarlett's cousins.

The unidentified victim is listed as being in critical but stable condition. Charges against Scarlett include attempted first-degree murder.

May 23

An arrest incident yesterday turned into a fatal shooting. It happened in Spring Lake as Highlands County Sheriff's Deputies went to the Concord Street home of 63-year-old Bradley Frank Begens. According to reports, the fugitive offender had multiple active arrest warrants against him and would not answer the door.

Deputies breached the house and reportedly found Begens hiding in a closet. They deployed a K-9 to make the apprehension, but when Begens reportedly produced a handgun, shots were fired.

Begens died at the scene, and a woman who was with him, identified as 60-year-old Doreen Murphy Turner, was arrested. She's been charged with felony murder in the second degree and resisting arrest with violence.

No Highlands County Sheriff's Office personnel, including the K-9, were injured during the incident. The deputies involved in the shooting will be placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation.

More growth may soon be coming to Avon Park. City council members last night approved on first reading the re-zoning of a 40-acre tract of land off Davis Citrus Road from county medium density to city high density.

The action will allow as many as 16 units per acre on the property near Lake Glenada. Land owner David Wheeler told the council in the short term, it would remain citrus groves, but it might be sold to a developer. He said it was unclear on what kinds of units - from mobile homes to apartments - that might go in on the property.

A second reading and public hearing was not announced.

Alcohol is suspected in two crashes that hurt three people in Polk County. The sheriff's office announced yesterday that Orlando's Ashauntie Cox was arrested last week after two crashes. The first happened in Frostproof on US 27 South at US 98 where she reportedly hit a pickup.

Deputies say the 32-year-old then fled the scene at a high rate of speed before crashing into an SUV. In that crash, her car flipped several times, and an eight-year-old and a five-year-old from Orlando were ejected. They're in critical condition.

A 27-year-old female passenger was also hurt and is in stable condition. Cox is facing charges that include DUI with serious bodily injury, and deputies say more charges are possible.

May 24

A new memorial may be coming to Avon Park. The effort apparently started after representatives of the Battle of the Bands Inc, were asked to remove a first responders' flag from the Veterans Memorial on the mile-long mall. They were told it ran afoul of the dedicated purpose of Veteran's Square.

Council members told organization representative J.R. Young to come back with a plan for a First Responders site.

Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader says the definition of "first responders" covers quite a bit of territory. There's police, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, nurses, dispatchers, corrections officers and search & rescue personnel - among others.

Young said he would look for possible sites and bring the matter back before council.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies have arrested an Avon Park man in connection with a Monday morning shooting incident. Edgar Elijah Brown is accused of firing shots at a passing car on Garrett Road.

According to reports, there were two bullet holes in the trunk of the car. Apparently, one of the rounds went through the back seat and struck the rear of the driver's seat, but stopped before it hit the driver.

Occupants of the vehicle identified Brown as the shooter. He was arrested and charged with numerous counts - including attempted murder.

A couple of shooting incidents in the Highway Park neighborhood, south of Lake Placid, yesterday have Highlands County Sheriff's detectives working. Both victims were taken to the hospital by car. Both are expected to live.

No suspects have been announced. It's unclear whether the incidents are related.

There was a stabbing last night near Avon Park. Currently, all that's known is that it occurred at Memorial and South Carolina. No other details have been released.

Lake Wales police have issued a warrant in connection with a May 8th fatal traffic crash. Aljurne Brooks of Haines City has been charged with two counts of DUI manslaughter in connection with the incident. Police say the 40-year-old Brooks was at the wheel of a Cadillac that ran a red light at Highway 27 and Washington Avenue, slamming into a semi-truck in front of the Florida Natural Citrus operation.

Killed were Gary Faniel jr and Javarcea Morton. Apparently, Brooks remains at large.

The northbound lanes of Highway 27 in Frostproof were closed for a time this morning. Apparently a semi-tanker caught fire and burned. It took a while for tow trucks to help clear the area.

May 25

Avon Park city council members will gather for a special meeting this evening. They again will take a look at the possibility of revamping Main Street. The plan, presented by Renaissance Planning already has had a couple of hearings.

Among other things, it involves reverse angle parking, chicanes and the narrowing of the roadway to slow traffic.

It's part of a resurfacing, restoration and rehabilitation program planned by the Florida Department of Transportation for State Road 17.

Council members are expected to take public input before making a final decision. The session will get underway tonight at 6pm.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies have made an arrest in connection with last week's break-in at the Hill-Gustat Middle School. A review of surveillance footage led detectives to 47-year-old Joseph Thomas Dunihue jr.

Deputies raided Dunihue's Sebring hotel room. There they found laptop computers and other equipment. Also discovered were drugs and a firearm. Dunihue was charged with numerous counts and taken to the Highlands County jail.

Lake Wales police still are on the lookout for a driver involved in a deadly crash in Highway 27 in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

They have issued an arrest warrant for Haines City's Aljerune Brooks. The 40-year-old was allegedly drunk and speeding when he ran a red light and hit a semi-truck two weeks ago.

Two Haines City residents in Brooks' car were killed. Anyone who knows Brooks' whereabouts is asked to contact police.

May 29

Today is Memorial Day and there are observances slated across Highlands County.

At 2:00 this afternoon, Memorial Day observances will be held at the Military Sea Services Museum on Roseland Avenue in Sebring. It will be a rare appearance by Congressman Scott Franklin, who will give the keynote address there.

This morning an observance was held at Lakeview Memorial Gardens between Sebring and Avon Park. Avon Park Air Force Range Commander Lt Col. Michael Ryan was the keynote speaker there.

At 3:00 this afternoon, there will be a universally-observed moment of silence, to honor the nation's fallen.

The Alan Jay Automotive Network gave away three automobiles to graduating seniors across Highlands County over the weekend. Grabbing the keys in Avon Park was Briana Abreau-Organo, in Sebring it was Ian Frazier and in Lake Placid it was Rylee Emmanuel.

Generally, these are late model, previously-owned vehicles, but this year, the Sebring winner got a new car.

This is the 25th year for the Wheels for A's program, where seniors get one entry for each A they earn during their senior year. To date, some 99 cars have been given away in the communities served by the Alan Jay Automotive network.

A Hardee County judge has extended 66-year-old Tracey Nix's inpatient stay at a mental health treatment facility. Two of Nix's grandchildren died under her care in less than a year.

In 2021, 16-month-old Ezra Schock drowned. Then last year, 7-month-old Uriel Schock was forgotten in the back seat of Nix's car.

Nix subsequently was charged with aggravated manslaughter in her granddaughter's death.

The judge granted a motion to allow Nix to go to a mental health facility outside the county this past April.

A Polk County woman who works for the Osceola County Sheriff's Office is behind bars. Mulberry's Ashlyn Crews was arrested Friday for charges that include stalking and filing a false police report. Deputies say the 24-year-old reported an elderly man was taking pictures of her three-year-old daughter at a UPS store on Shepherd Road, and Crews say she also found explicit photos of other children on his phone.

She also allegedly posted photos on Facebook of the man's home, published his name, his wife's name and where his wife worked.

Investigators, though, say there's no proof the man broke any laws, and Crews retracted her claims. Crews is due in court today. She's a telecommunicator at the Osceola County Sheriff's Office, but there's no word on her job status.

May 30

South Florida State College presidential finalist Fred Hawkins reportedly will start a two-day visit at the school today. On his schedule are a tour of the district, including the Highlands, Hardee and Desoto campuses. Hawkins also will stop by the Lake Placid Center as well as the Hotel Jacaranda.

This afternoon at 4:00 Hawkins will have a community reception where he'll meet with the search committee, foundation members, alumni, legislators, community leaders and the general public.

That'll be at the Alan Jay Center for the Performing Arts.

A meeting by the District Board of Trustees will be held next Wednesday to select a new SFSC President.

Sebring Firefighters were busy overnight. They were called to a blaze on Nasturtium Avenue. According to reports, the structure was fully involved in flames when units arrived at the scene. Apparently the three occupants of the house got out without injury.

Cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Well, summertime is right around the corner and you may think that it gets pretty hot here. However, a new climatological study by Slacker, shows Highlands County's not that bad. In fact, on the list of the top 25 hottest counties in Florida,

Highlands ranks 25th. The survey shows the average temperature from June to August is 83-degrees here.

Okeechobee was 24th, Hardee was 22nd, and Polk County was 3rd on the list. Top Honors went to Pinellas County with an average of 84 degrees over the time period.

May 31

Highlands and Hardee County sheriff's deputies combined last night to recover a stolen car and arrest a suspect. Picked up in connection with the incident was Jimmy Ray Jackson. According to reports the 41-year-old Avon Park man was at the wheel of a stolen car that was spotted at the CVS drug store at Highway 27 and State Road 64 in the City of Charm.

Speeds reportedly reached 100 mph during the pursuit. It ended at Old Town Creek Road, when Hardee Deputies deployed stop sticks.

Jackson was charged with Fleeing to Elude and booked into the Hardee County jail.

South Florida State College presidential candidate Fred Hawkins is winding up his visit to the school today. Yesterday, Hawkins got the grand tour of the campuses and had a community reception.

Today is packed with meetings. This morning, Hawkins had an open session with faculty, staff and students. This afternoon it's a series of meetings and interviews with Foundation and Trustee members for some more focused question-and-answer.

The Board of Trustees will meet next Wednesday to vote on a successor for current SFSC President Thomas Leitzel.

Avon Park may soon be beefing up their code enforcement efforts. Vice Mayor Jim Barnard has called for the revision of the city's "hard costs" when it comes to enforcing building and other codes in the City of Charm. In many cases, the council has reduced fines, but retained so called "hard costs," such as visiting and inspecting sites.

Barnard says he wants that to reflect true costs such as employee hours, vehicle and other charges in the execution of code enforcement activities.

Two children are hurt after a hit-and-run in Polk County. It happened Monday in Wahneta. The sheriff's office says an eight-year-old and a six-year-old were on an ATV when they were hit, head-on, by another ATV driven by Guy Kolmel.

He allegedly fled the scene on foot and ran to his home.

When deputies arrived, they say Kolmel refused to come out, so deputies went in and arrested him. He's facing charges that include leaving the scene of a crash with injury. The kids were taken to the hospital. They're expected to survive.

June 1

Today begins the 2023 Hurricane Season and Highlands County officials say they are ready for what that may bring. They say the county's emergency management officials have made strides over the past year getting prepared.

Better organization and clearer communication have been the focus of their efforts. Among other things, they have been holding preparedness seminars throughout the community during the past few weeks.

Officials of the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration have predicted a "normal" hurricane season - with 12-17 named storms, 5-9 possibly becoming hurricanes.

County authorities also urge residents to develop a hurricane plan.

Another high-speed chase overnight, and another arrest. Highlands County sheriff's deputies reportedly spotted a Ford F-150 that had been reported stolen out of Lake Placid. Reportedly, it was chased from Avon Park to Sebring, then down Schumacher Road where it crashed into a tree at Blueberry Road.

The occupants fled, but were tracked by K-9 Waylon. They ran through a pasture and a swamp. When arrested they found three teenagers - two from Lake Placid and one from Avon Park.

The three were charged with vehicle theft and firearms charges.

Hardee County's board of county commissioners will meet this morning. Among other things, they will consider whether or not to lift that county's burn ban.

In other action, commissioners will consider the first reading of a measure to change 132 acres of property from Agriculture to Farm Residential. That property is located on the south side of US 17 South north of Allman Street. They'll also consider similar action for 92-acres off Platt Road.

June 2

It appears when it comes to new construction value, the Avon Park/Sebring metro area is above the national average. A new report by Construction Coverage, looking at the US locations investing the most in affordable housing, found that locally, the average construction value was \$230,000 per unit.

That's slightly over the national average of \$226,000 per unit. The survey reflects some 663 housing units that were authorized to be built here in 2022.

Meanwhile, the median home price in the Avon Park/Sebring metro area also shows above the national average. Locally, it was set at just over \$395,000. Nationally the number was just over \$357,000.

The debt ceiling deal passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support Wednesday night, but it also had plenty of bipartisan opposition: 117 members voted against it.

Seventy-one Republicans and 46 Democrats voted against the debt limit bill. Of the Republicans that resisted, several were from Florida - but not Scott Franklin, who represents Highlands County. Other Florida Republicans such as Matt Gaetz, Vern Buchanan, Kat Cammack, Anna Paulina Luna and Greg Steube opposed the measure.

Eight men the Polk County sheriff calls monsters are in custody. Sheriff Grady Judd announced yesterday that eight child porn suspects were arrested as part of Operation May's Monsters. They face about 13-hundred felonies combined. Judd says the videos and photographs are some of the most horrific his detectives have ever seen. The suspects range in age from 24 to 66, and they include a 40-year-old Davenport man who works for Disney World at the Cosmic Rays Restaurant. The youngest alleged victim is a newborn, but investigators aren't sure if any are county residents.

June 5

It appears the dry season may be over. The Keech-Byrum drought index has dropped to about 200 out of a maximum 800.

Both Hardee and Polk Counties already have rescinded their burn bans. Highlands County commissioners may take up the issue at their meeting tomorrow.

Rain is expected again today. That's part of Tropical Storm Arlene, that has been dumping water here for the past several days. No flood or other damage has been reported in connection with this latest weather event.

A number of people, displaying mexican flags, have been demonstrating in Avon Park. They were showing their displeasure with a new Florida law addressing the problem with illegal aliens in the Sushine State. Among other things, the measure mandates the use of the E-Verify program to ensure that employees in businesses here are in the country legally.

It also enhances penalties against human traffickers.

A weekend drug bust in Sebring. Units of the Highlands County Sheriff's office served a warrant on a Lincoln Avenue address and arrested four people.

33-year-old Nicholas Keyontay was charged with trafficking in MDMA, possession of drugs with intent to sell and other charges. 31-year-old Sharry Tiasha Smith and 34-year-old Renee Malcom were charged with possession of a controlled substance, and 32-year-old Quentin Arseieno Leveridge was charged with possession of ammunition by a convicted felon.

During the search deputies recovered MDMA, as well as other drugs - plus a rifle and ammunition.

Frostproof city council members will discuss a new ordinance when they get together tonight for their first meeting in June. The measure would provide for the annual inspection of rental properties. Staff members in The Friendly City say they want to implement an annual inspection of rental properties by the Fire Chief to confirm the buildings are up to code.

In other action, Vice Mayor Austin Gravely wants the council to discuss the future possibilities of the unfinished west wing of the Frostproof City Hall.

A Polk County woman was injured in an Orange County hit-and-run crash. It happened yesterday morning at SR 408 and Chickasaw Trail.

FHP says a Haines City woman ran a red light while trying to turn left and hit a car. She lost control, went off the road, over a curb, onto the sidewalk and then flipped over.

Bystanders pulled the 71-year-old from the SUV just before it caught fire. Troopers say she was taken to the hospital and is in critical condition. The other driver left the scene. It's described as a small white car with damage to its front left headlight.

June 6

It's a double-header for the Highlands County commission today. This afternoon, commissioners will convene for a workshop on the county's budget for the 2023-2024 fiscal year. There they'll hear presentations from the directors of the county's business services, community programs, development services, parks & facilities, engineering, critical infrastructure, road & bridge and public safety divisions.

This morning they met in regular session. Among other things, the board looked at extending a moratorium on the county's impact fees, and considered lifting the county's burn ban.

There will be a prayer vigil on the Circle in downtown Sebring this afternoon. Members of the community have called for the session in preparation to go to this evening's Sebring city council meeting. There they will ask the council to reconsider their vote on the upcoming Pride observance in the City on the Circle.

Concerns have been raised over the sponsoring group's ties to the Democrat Party of Florida.

The prayer session will be held on the Circle from 4:30 unto 5:15 this afternoon.

A couple traffic incidents kept Highlands County first responders busy yesterday. Skipper Road west of 27 was closed for a time when a dump truck went over on its side. No injuries were reported.

The southbound lanes of Highway 27 were blocked for a couple hours yesterday due to an accident north of Avon Park. Apparently two cars collided near the Highlands Blvd. intersection. At least one person was injured in that one.

A medical episode is responsible for a deadly crash in Polk County. It happened Saturday in Winter Haven on Cypress Gardens Boulevard.

The sheriff's office says 29-year-old Andrew Hensley was driving when he suffered a medical episode. He drove off the road, hit a man and the Economy Inn Suites motel.

Deputies say the 33-year-old man he hit died at the scene, and the motel sustained substantial damage. Hensley suffered minor injuries. No charges have been announced, but an investigation is underway.

June 7

Members of the South Florida State College Board of Trustees got together this morning and selected Fred Hawkins as the new president for the school.

Hawkins, a former Florida House Representative, became the only candidate for the post after three previous candidates pulled their resumes from consideration.

He already has toured the campus and met with students, teachers, administrators and members of the community.

Current president Thomas Leitzel was slated to step down the first of the month, but a series of events hampered the naming of a successor.

It appears Highlands County's burn ban and impact fees will be on for a bit longer. According to reports, the burn ban needs a notice of 10 days before can be lifted. That means it will be in effect until at least June 20th.

The county's impact fees have been suspended for another year. Apparently, a study needs to be done before the first of July - and there's just not enough time to crunch those numbers. Commissioner agreed to get a study done to determine if or when the moratorium might be lifted.

Impact fees are designed to charge developers for the impact that residential or commercial construction might have on the community.

Without much discussion, Sebring city council members last night approved the start of proceedings to annex some 88 acres at the intersection of US 98 and State Road 66 for development. Martz Family Holdings, who own and operate Insight Auctioneers, want the property to enhance and develop their operation - currently now being run just off State Road 66.

As part of the plan, municipal water service would be run to the sight. Martz said a full build-out of the property will take 5-to-6 years to complete.

Do you like avacados? A Frostproof grove owner hopes so. Mitchell McLellan reportdly is switching from oranges in an effort to begin a new cash crop.

McClellan reportedly has 700 avocado trees on seven acres, and he says he's the only farmer in the area now growing avocados for commercial production.

He said he made the switch because Hurricane Ian and citrus greening has made growing oranges too risky financially.

Avocados require a bit of patience. McLellan says it'll take two years before he sees a harvest.

June 8

You may be hearing some increased air traffic in the area today. Officials at the Avon Air Force range say they will host training exercises until very late tonight.

They did not indicate what entity is using the facility, or what kind of aircraft might be involved.

Tomorrow, crews are scheduled to detonate old ordnance at the range, as part of their summer EOD cleanup. Residents may hear several loud discharges during the morning hours.

According to reports, Fred Hawkins has accepted the offer to become president of South Florida State College. The SFSC Board of Trustees yesterday offered

Hawkins the post. Now, contract negotiations will get underway to hammer out a pact to head up the school.

The board has been looking for a successor to Dr. Thomas Leitzel, who was supposed to have stepped down the first of the month. However, a series of circumstances has hampered the effort.

SFSC Trustees are expected to meet June 21st to take final action on the measure. If all goes well, Hawkins could take over the school July 3rd.

Residents who want to save money on disaster preparedness supplies have one more day to do so. The sales tax holiday for hurricane supplies will end tomorrow. That includes no sales tax on small amounts of pet food & supplies, household goods, emergency lighting, fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, tarps, and portable generators among other things.

If you missed this one, don't worry, there will be a similar tax holiday in August.

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June 9

It's official - there will not be a Super Sebring this year. The world Endurance Championship series has released their schedule for the 2024 racing season and Sebring is not on it. Instead, they will host round one in Qatar.

There's no indication as to what races will support next year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring, but it is expected, among others, The Alan Jay 120 will return as one of the events leading up to America's Premier Sports Car Endurance Race.

Did you miss The Liquid Moly Pro Watercross National Tour last month when they kicked off their 2023 season in Sebring on Lake Jackson? Don't worry - CBS Sports captured the highlights of the jet ski racing event.

You can watch it in the air conditioned comfort of your own home beginning at 11:30 tomorrow morning.

You may hear some booms out by the bombing range today. Crews at the range are scheduled to detonate old ordinances, as part of their summer EOD cleanup. Residents may hear several loud discharges during the morning hours.

Residents who want to save money on disaster preparedness supplies have one more day to do so. The sales tax holiday for hurricane supplies will end tonight.

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Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd has become one of the most recent visitors to the border wall in Arizona. Judd made the trek to Cochise County along with Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis, Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody, and Sheriff Wayne Ivey of Brevard County.

Judd caled the situation "a crisis" that ranges to communities across the country.

Following his tour, Judd said the cartels are in charge at the border, facilitating deadly fentanyl and methamphetamine coming into the U.S., and killing people by the thousands.

He also noted the victims involved in human trafficking.

June 12

Friends have identified a Sebring man who reportedly died yesterday in a Hardee County traffic accident as Dennis Mallen. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate

the 53-year-old motorist was westbound on State Road 64 near Bennett Road, when his car crossed the center line and ran head-on into an oncoming pickup.

The driver of the truck, a 37-year-old man from Ona, suffered only minor injuries. Troopers say the Sebring man was NOT buckled up, he was pronounced dead at the scene.

Mallen reportedly was an actor and producer who had done a project for the Florida Farm Bureau.

An accident in South Highlands County this morning had no serious injuries to report. The vehicle went out of control and overturned on State Road 70 near the intersection with County Road 721 shortly before 4am.

Residents east of Sebring may notice some smoke in the area today. There is a 300-acre controlled burn scheduled today in the area of Arbuckle Creek Road and Maxcy Road, that may produce smoke that impacts residents in the area.

Because of the smoke dispersion index, smoke may be prevalent in other areas as well.

The Avon Park city council will have quite a bit of business to take care of this evening when they meet in regular session. They'll have a public hearing on a zoning change for nearly 40-acres of property off Davis Citrus Road. The land could become a new housing development.

In other action, the council will get an update from City Attorney Gerald Buhr about state legislation passed in the most recent session in Tallahassee and how it will affect the city.

Council also will be asked to approve an "Enough is Enough" Walk for Hope on the city's southside - to raise awareness on gun violence there.

A road closure is in effect in Polk County because of a sinkhole. The Polk County Sheriff's Office says the hole opened up on private property Thursday. It was 75-feet in diameter, but continues to grow. While inspections and repairs are underway, Scott Lake Road is closed at Fitzgerald Road until further notice.

June 13

Avon Park city council members got an update on state legislation that will affect the city when they met in regular session last night.

Attorney Gerald Buhr gave the board an overview, ranging from council members' financial disclosure forms to a new statute that says any municipal legislation now will need to have a "business impact estimate" attached to it as part of its verbiage.

Other new laws include mandates on public noticing, food trucks, immigration, the regulation of male and female bathrooms and a prohibition on the regulation of gas stoves among other things.

Highlands County School Board members met last night for a workshop. At issue were changes to the school's code of conduct. Deputy Superintendent of Schools Andrew Lethbridge gave the board an overview of new state laws and their effect on the classroom.

Among other things, Lethbridge discussed the role of the teacher in the classroom, and the amount of force they might use to maintain order.

He also outlined state mandates on principals and consequences issued on unruly students, issues regarding the student dress code, student medications and other issues.

Officials of the Highlands County Sheriff's office are warning residents to be cautious if looking for real estate on places such as Craigslist or Facebook marketplace.

They say those kinds of platforms are where scammers like to do their business. In fact, one scam has already cost at least one local resident thousands of dollars.

If you see a post for a rental and the price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Scammers will copy the photos from a legitimate listing, then offer it on the cheap.

The catch is they want money up front before they purportedly will send the keys. They get the money, the victims get - nothing.

Officials say renters or buyers should do their due diligence, and make certain they are dealing with the actual owners of the property.

June 14

A May 15 accident that cost the life of an Avon Park Middle School student is spawning changes in railroad crossings in the City of Charm. 13-year-old Malik Pearson was struck by an Amtrak passenger train as he walked home from school.

Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader has since met with officials of the Highlands County Sheriff's Office and CSX Transportation - who own the track. They say they have obtained funding for a pedestrian gate. Schrader says he also will get with the school board, to help manage how students walk along the railroad tracks as they traverse to and from classes.

It's been a long investigation, but Highlands County Sheriff's officials have made a couple of arrests in what is described as a massive fraud ring. Arrested were 33-year-old Mark Marlin Moree and 35-year-old Ashley Christine Schenck. The pair face charges of grand theft, trafficking in stolen credit cards, scheming to defraud and forgery counts.

Sheriff's officials say it began with the complaint of the theft of blank check books. However, in a search of the couple's Sebring home, they found hundreds of stolen credit cards, mail, stolen merchandise and narcotics.

Investigators say there are hundreds of victims in Highlands and surrounding counties. The case remains under investigation.

There were some tense moments at the Circle K store at Highway 27 and US 98 south of Sebring yesterday. Seems a soda machine malfunctioned, filling the back office area with CO gas and setting off an alarm.

Firefighters from Desoto City responded and ventilated the area - there were no injuries.

Today is June 14 - it's both Flag Day and the birthday of the United States Army. In honor of that, there will be observances at the Military Sea Services Museum in Sebring. There will be a ceremonial cake cutting this afternoon at 1:00, and free tours of the museum.

June 15

New Avon Park Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kamela Long came before the city council to give an update on their activities. Reportedly, the Chamber has sunk some \$80,000 into improvements at their Main Street location.

Among the repairs were patching roof leaks, a complete rewiring of the building, the replacement of drywall where mold was found and a new security system. Still on the agenda - improvements to the landscaping.

They also have added two new spaces on the back of the building for rental. One is slated to become the Heartland Pack & Ship. No word on when that will start operation.

Long says her next project will be to assist with the City of Charm's Independence Day celebration on the shores of Lake Verona this July 4th.

Highlands County School Board members got an update on a College Board conference in Chicago recently attended by a number of administration personnel. Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education Danielle Erwin gave the report, saying some of the ideas they gleaned already are being woven into school's itineraries.

Florida Governor Ron Desantis earlier this year said the state should re-evaluate their relationship with the College Board.

Officials in Polk County have announced they've received a half-million-dollar grant to protect lands around the Avon Park Air Force Range. The sprawling facility comprises better than 100,000 acres and covers parts of both Highlands and Polk Counties.

The funding is part of \$6.1 million in awards announced Monday to military communities through the Defense Infrastructure Grant Program, the Defense Reinvestment Grant Program and the Florida Defense Support Task Force Grant Program.

County officials did not immediately announce their plans for the money.

June 16

Highlands County School Board members voted in favor of parental consent when they met in regular session. They moved to mandate parental notification if

students were issued so-called "well being questionnaires." Under current state law, parents would only be informed of such surveys if their kids are in kindergarten through third grade.

School board members voted to mandate parental involvement in the process for any Highlands students under the age of 18.

Reportedly, such surveys cover a wide variety of behavioral health topics, including; safety, smoking, alcohol consumption, sexual behavior, gender identity, self-image, diet, and social media use among other things.

They say it's a way for school districts to track trends, and for states to compare to each other and to compare local trends against national ones.

It appears the city of Avon Park wants to speed up their meetings. At the behest of City Manager Mark Schrader, the council will begin to move more items to a consent agenda portion of the session.

The idea is to give blanket approval to issues that need no discussion - with a single vote by council. Should any council member want to discuss any of the consent items at length, they can have it moved to the regular action agenda.

Local officials, historical buffs and residents will gather this morning near Lorida Park, to unveil the Lorida Schoolhouse Historical Marker, The metal plaque will commemorate the school and information about this historic building.

The ceremonies are set to occur this morning at 10:00.

Another championship sporting event is coming to Highlands County. Officials of Visit Sebring say the American Cornhole League's Florida State Championship will be held beginning today in the Alan Jay Arena at the Highlands County Fairgrounds.

Staged by the East Coast Beach Baggers, the event is slated to run through Sunday.

The state's new death penalty law could affect a murder trial in Polk County. Bryan Riley could get the death penalty for killing four people in a

shooting in Lakeland in 2021, and lawyers argued yesterday about how many jury votes should be needed to apply the death penalty.

At the time of the killings, death penalty votes needed to be unanimous, but this year, state lawmakers lowered the threshold from 12 votes to just eight. Riley's lawyers say 12 votes should be needed because the law was not passed retroactively. Prosecutors, though, say the new law should be in effect because it was passed before Riley's trial has started. News Channel 8 reports the judge did not issue a ruling.

June 26

Avon Park city council members will set their truth in millage rates when they meet in regular session this evening. That will show residents in the City of Charm the actual amount of property taxes they are paying compared to last year's levy.

In other action, the council will look at their lease with the Classic Caladium operation at the city's airport and will hear their audit report from consultants Clifton, Larsen Allen.

Tonight, will mark the city's first try at a consent agenda - in an effort to speed the sessions.

It appears that progress is slow but steady at Harder Hall. In a prepared statement, developer Robert Blackmon says he plans to be on site this week as his team works through engineering and architectural work.

Blackmon said they have taken steps to seal the roof - which will stop deterioration on the historic Sebring structure. The plan is to move forward methodically with the restoration to make certain it is done correctly.

A weekend blaze in Lake Wales reportedly destroyed a Timberline Road home. According to reports, a youngster woke up to find the house in flames and notified other family members - who escaped without serious injury.

The family pet - a cat - reportedly perished in the incident.

According to reports, the house appears to be a total loss. Cause remains under investigation.

A gofundme account has been set up for the family.

Lake Whales police raided a local pizza joint in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge, when it was discovered that drugs may have been being dealt there.

According to reports, Detectives from the Lake Wales Police Department's Crime Suppression Unit launched an undercover operation. After a number of deliveries, Pizanno Pizza Manager Leon Griffith was arrested, as was assistant manager Hailee Sullivan.

The deliveries included cocaine and prescription drugs.

June 27

Avon Park city council members, sitting as the city's Community Redevelopment Agency board, have called for a special meeting with their advisory board to discuss how to disperse Tax Increment Financing money in the wake of the Florida Legislature's action restricting how that money can be spent.

Because the state has cracked down on financing special events, the city is looking at building playgrounds, parks and perhaps even an amphitheater for public use.

Avon Park Mayor Garrett Anderson noted that CRA's also are allowed to spend the money on maintenance of such facilities.

A Fort Meyers man wanted for taking money from a Sebring woman's estate, has been located and arrested - in Nevada. According to reports, 61-year-old Gary Gene Campbell had been given power of attorney in the affairs of the victim. However, sheriff's detectives say Campbell continued to transfer money from her accounts into his, even after her death.

In all, he's accused of taking nearly \$450,000.

Campbell has been charged with counts of grand theft, fraud and exploitation of the elderly.

A Highlands County resident found the benefits of having a home fire extinguisher yesterday, when their dryer caught fire. Units from Desoto City responded to the call on Hampshire drive. There they found the homeowner already had extinguished the flames.

Local fire officials urge residents to have an ABC Dry Powder extinguisher handy in the house in case of a dryer or other kind of fire.

A family described as "a cancer" in their community is facing drug trafficking charges in Winter Haven.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd announced yesterday that 12 people were arrested in a drug sweep. The ages of those arrested range from 15 to 69.

Investigators say they seized enough fentanyl to kill over 95-thousand people. The alleged leader of the drug ring and several other suspects are members of the Rogers family.

Judd says they has been a cancer in the Inwood community since the 1980s, and they have exposed families there to unwanted drug activity, gangs, violence and more.

June 28

The National Weather Service has issued a heat advisory today for a dozen Florida counties including Highlands, Hardee, Polk and Desoto.

Temperatures are forecast to go into the middle 90s with heat index numbers as high as 109.

For those who have to be outside, experts recommend wearing light, loose fitting clothing, take frequent breaks in air-conditioned or shaded areas and most importantly, drink plenty of water and stay hydrated.

The advisory is in effect from noon until 6pm today, when afternoon rains are expected to cool things down a bit.

June 29

One person was killed and another was injured in a traffic crash south of Lake Placid last night. According to Florida Highway Patrol reports, the accident happened after 10:00 on Highway 70 near Robert McGhee Road, when a 27-year-old Arcadia man's Sport Utility Vehicle left the highway and hit a concrete utility pole.

A passenger in the vehicle, another Arcadia man, reportedly was seriously injured. FHP troopers indicate neither of the victims were buckled up.

Highlands County School Board members will get together this evening for a special Thursday night session. Reportedly, the meeting was pushed back a couple

days so Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore and her executive team could attend a training seminar.

On tonight's agenda will be board approval of several contracts with third party vendors for school services.

There are indications that several citizens have questions for the board about budget and staffing issues.

A delivery man is a Highlands County woman's guardian angel. That's how Avon Park's Nancy Reyburn describes Jose Sanchez, who came to her rescue on Tuesday.

The 78-year-old Reyburn was locked out of her home at the Crystal Lake Club, and when she tried to get in through a window, she got stuck. She couldn't move for five hours, but when she saw Sanchez driving by to make a delivery, she screamed to get his attention, and it worked.

Sanchez says he never heard an 80-year-old lady scream so loud. He stopped, called 911 and stayed with Reyburn 'til help came. She says she believes people are put in a place for a reason, and that morning, Sanchez was put there to help her.

A child is dead after a crash in Polk County. It happened around 7:30 yesterday morning in Winter Haven on Cypress Gardens Road.

Polk County Sheriff's officials say the seven-year-old girl was in a pickup truck that hit a car and rolled over. She was taken to the hospital with severe head trauma and passed away.

Her father, who was driving the truck, suffered minor injuries. The other driver was not seriously injured.

June 30

Highlands County commissioners will hold a special session today to consider a couple of taxing issues. First on the agenda will be a discussion on whether or not to add another percent onto the Tourist Tax.

Reportedly, that money would be used to build, or add on to a tourist facility here in Highlands County. Apparently, if commissioners don't take action on it today, the matter would go to the voters in a referendum.

Also on the agenda is a public hearing to consider extending the moratorium on impact fees. Such fees would be leveled on developers to pay for various impacts new construction would have on the county.

That session will be held at the commissioners' board room starting at 2:00 this afternoon.

An item on the consent agenda sparked controversy at last night's special school board meeting. Resident Jesse Sapp brought up the issue, after spotting an item having to do with a "comprehensive school health program."

Both Sapp and school board member Nicole Radonski questioned items regarding the so-called "Youth Risk Behavior" survey.

The board moved to have staff re-negotiate their contract with the Florida Department of Health, and remove the item from their pact.

Avon Park city council members are getting ready to revise the fire assessment for homes and businesses in the City of Charm. At their regular meeting, council members voted to ink an agreement with the consulting firm Stantec.

The firm then will do another survey of the city and the fire department, to determine the amounts of money that could be assessed for fire protection in Avon Park.

The survey will cost some \$42,000 to complete.

The celebration of our nation's birthday will get an early start, as Hardee County stages their "Red White & Boom" festivities tomorrow. Set at Pioneer Park in Zolfo Springs, it'll run from noon until 10:00 tomorrow night, topped with a fireworks display.

The event itself is free, however, there will be a Kids' Zone area with an all-day-play wristband charge of \$10.

Other events locally will start next week, with Independence celebrations set at Sun 'N Lake and in Frostproof this coming Monday.

Apparently, there was shooting incident in Frostproof overnight involving a Polk County Sheriff's deputy.

According to reports, it involved a hostage situation in the area of the Scenic Highway and TS Wilson Road. The suspect is deceased.

It appears the City of Charm is in great financial shape. That was the word at the regular Avon Park city council meeting in twin reports from representatives of Clifton Larsen Allen and the city's outside accountant Mike Brindelson.

Jenifer Fowler of C-L-A told the council the audit was on time and one of the smoothest the city has had in quite a while. Brindelson said his report showed all indicators showing positive.

City Manager Mark Schader had words of praise for Financial Director Melody Sauerhafer and her team in putting the city in such a good financial position.