

JANUARY 1

So far, Highlands County's population has not grown in 2024. Officials at Advent Hospital Sebring report no New Year's babies as of Midnight. There was one tax deduction for last year with a baby girl born Saturday morning. Baby, mother – and dad – all are doing fine.

Despite the plethora of fireworks, officials say there were no pyrotechnic-related injuries to report from New Year's Eve.

However, Hardee County Sheriff's officials apparently made several arrests for people who were discharging firearms to celebrate the New Year.

A 76-year-old Sebring man reportedly was the last traffic-related death in Highlands County for 2023. Florida Highway Patrol reports the man was riding his bicycle on State Road 66, and made a left turn in front of an oncoming pickup.

The cyclist was pronounced dead at the scene.

A man is dead after a motorcycle crash involving a teenager in Polk County. It happened Saturday night near Lakeland at Deeson and Greenfield roads in Kathleen. The sheriff's office says a Lakeland man was riding his motorcycle when an SUV driven by an 18-year-old Lakeland woman turned into his path.

Deputies say witnesses told them the motorcycle may not have had its lights on. The two collided, and the man was thrown off his bike. He was taken to the hospital where he passed away. He was identified as 41-year-old Larry Varnum. The teenager was not hurt, but her 18-year-old passenger was taken to the hospital with minor injuries.

JANUARY 2

It appears that Highlands County registered the first traffic fatality of the New Year yesterday. The accident happened on Northbound Highway 27 at Vision Street in front of the Highway Park community south of Lake Placid.

Florida Highway Patrol reports now indicate a car driven by a 29-year-old Lake Placid man made a left turn into Vision Street in front of an oncoming car driven by a Sebring woman. The man was injured, the woman was killed. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Firefighters from Desoto City, Lake Placid and Highlands Park were called to a structure fire on Gossamer Avenue in Lake Placid yesterday. They were able to keep the flames

contained to a bedroom, hall and bathroom area.

No damage estimate has been determined, but officials say most of the home's contents were saved. No cause was released; however it has been ruled as "accidental."

Highlands County commissioners usually meet the first Tuesday of each month, however, due to yesterday's holiday celebration, the meeting has been pushed back to this coming Thursday. Not much is on the action agenda – save for some housekeeping issues.

Sebring City council, however, will meet for their regular session tonight. The only thing scheduled there are votes on a couple of easement issues.

A new state law is driving out another local official. In Polk County, Eagle Lake Mayor Cory Coler has stepped down.

He announced his resignation two weeks ago because of a new financial disclosure law that took effect yesterday.

The law requires local elected officials to publicly show all assets and liabilities of a thousand dollars or more.

Coler says he's willing to share that kind of information with his wife but not his neighbors in a small town of just three thousand people.

He's the second city official to resign over the law after Commissioner Scott Clark did so. Vice Mayor Suzy Wilson announced her resignation but changed her mind. The 43-year-old Coler had been on the city commission for over a decade, but says he thinks the new law will make it hard to attract people to public service.

JANUARY 3

The New Year begins with some good news for business in the area. A new report from Upgraded Points shows that the Sebring/Avon Park area is just one of nine metro areas in the country to see an increase in brick-and-mortar retail outlets.

There is one retail store for every 3.2 residents here.

The increase measured only about a third of a percent, but the survey showed that many states in the northeast and west marked a decline in local retail outlets.

A New Year 's Eve water leak at the Groves at Victoria Park apartments has resulted in the displacement of all 140 residents there. The City of Sebring has condemned the entire building – saying that residents cannot return until the fire alarm and sprinkler system are fully operational.

For the time being, residents have been transitioned to local hotels, and New Hope has

been called to assist in short and long-term accommodations.
It remains unclear how long it may take for restoration and drying efforts.

The Frostproof Chamber of Commerce has a new executive director, Amanda Bryant started work today. Bryant is the former marketing director for Bryant & Smith Insurance.

Shew says she currently is getting up to speed with current chamber projects to begin work in the Friendly City.

JANUARY 4

Highlands County commissioners finally will be getting together for their first meeting of the New Year today. Due to Monday's celebration of the New Year, their regular Tuesday meeting was pushed back to Thursday morning.

Even so, there's not much on the agenda, commissioners will look at extending certificates of operation for a couple local ambulance services and will be asked to approve grants for tens of thousands of dollars to Nu-Hope Elder Care and the Peace River Center.

The Ninth Annual Veterans Expo will begin its two-day run tomorrow at American Legion Post 69 in Avon Park. It will begin with the escort and placing of the Global War on Terrorism Wall. That will happen about noon. Those wanting to escort the wall need to be on site no later than 9am.

The Expo will run tomorrow and Saturday with veteran's resources ranging from counselling and therapy to benefits and job opportunities. Additionally there will be resources for spouses of veterans, children's activities, live music and food vendors.

A traffic crash in Hardee County yesterday has had some unintended consequences. The afternoon crash tied up traffic on Highway 17 south of Zolfo Springs for several hours. But as vehicles used a detour on Fish Branch Road, a large truck became stuck on the bridge there.

Fish Branch now is closed until an inspection can be conducted on the wooden structure, and Hardee Road and Bridge confirms that it is safe for public transport.

JANUARY 5

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Florida Forest Service crews were joined by firefighters from several local stations yesterday in extinguishing a couple of fires here.

The first was a brush fire in the Venus area, spawned by several burn piles that got out of control. There were no injuries reported, but the crews did save a piece of heavy equipment that was parked on the property. No word on how much land the flames charred.

Units then responded to a house fire on Meadowbrook Street in Sylvan Shores. Crews from Desoto City came down from Sebring to help on that one. They were able to contain the fire to the kitchen. There were no injuries there either, cause there has not been released.

A couple of traffic accidents kept law enforcement agencies busy this morning. The southbound lanes of Highway 27 were closed near Venus for a time due to a traffic accident. Early reports indicate a pickup and a semi tractor-trailer rig came together around 6:00am.

Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate there were injuries in than one.

There was another auto accident at County Road 731 and Gram Dairy road this morning. No details have been released on that one.

JANUARY 8

It looks to be a fairly quiet meeting for the Avon Park city council tonight. Among other things, they will transfer responsibilities for renting the community center to the Heartland Cultural Alliance, will look at changing zoning for a couple acres on Green Street, and a planned unit development on Central Avenue.

The Council also will be asked for road closures for the upcoming Blueberry Festival and hear the first reading of a measure providing for health insurance for the council.

New Frostproof Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Amanda Bryant will get her first official appearance before the Frostproof city council tonight. She'll be asking for road closures to permit the 22nd Annual Orange Blossom Festival and Classic Car Show in the Friendly City.

That'll be coming up in February.

Traffic on State Road 64 in the small Hardee County community of Ona is snarled this morning. Reportedly a Semi truck and a car collided at the flashing light near the railroad tracks.

Early reports indicate it may have been a fatal traffic crash.

The Avon Park Depot Museum is planning a celebrity baseball game to help raise funds for their planned baseball museum. Organizers say they now are in search of celebrities who want to suit up for the January 20th competition.

so far, Avon Park native Thomas "Flash" Gordon and car dealer Bill Jarrett have signed up for the game, which is designed to be a re-creation of the April 1932 match-up between the St. Louis Cardinals and the House of David during spring training. Those interested in participating may contact Doc Sevigny at 863-414-3850.

JANUARY 9

Officials in Highlands County and across the Sunshine State are warning residents to be prepared for some heavy weather.

Strong storms could hit Central Florida by this afternoon. The National Weather Service is warning about strong to severe thunderstorms that could even produce a few tornadoes.

A Wind Advisory has been put into effect for several areas of the state. The NWS warns that gusty winds could blow around unsecured objects, tree limbs could be blown down and a few power outages may result

It's back to school today for students across Highlands County. Local officials say that classes and after school activities currently are scheduled to continue as usual, despite weather forecast warnings.

They say if there are any adjustments to the schedule, they will be announced.

Highlands County Commissioner Don Elwell is scheduled to host the latest in his series of Town Hall-style meetings tonight. It will be the 21st such session he has held since first being elected to the Highlands County commission.

In addition to giving updates on a number of current issues, Elwell will take questions from the audience. A number of county department heads will be in attendance as well. Pizza will be served at the South Florida State College University Center beginning at 5:30 with the meeting to commence at 6pm.

Highlands County's Economic Development has suffered a blow. County officials have now announced that ED Executive Manager Jeff King submitted his resignation shortly

before Christmas.

The ED Executive Manager position now is open, with staff maintaining functions of the department.

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JANUARY 10

It appears central Florida dodged the bullet as some heavy weather rumbled through the area last night. Law enforcement agencies in Highlands, Hardee and Polk counties have reported no incidents of wind or water damage.

There were several early closings yesterday including after school activities at the Highlands County schools and facilities in the city of Bartow. Everything should be up and running as usual today.

Meanwhile, Bay County is dealing with what the sheriff calls pretty catastrophic damage from the storm. Sheriff Tommy Ford assessed the damage across Bay County yesterday. He estimates about a hundred people are displaced. Governor Ron DeSantis says the Panhandle got hit with four tornadoes that touched down. The Department of Emergency Management estimates they may have been EF-Two tornadoes. No one was killed, but minor injuries were reported, and some homes had their roofs torn off. At one point, over 85-thousand people were without power.

New Florida disclosure laws for elected officials have claimed several city council members across the Sunshine State – and now it's hit home. Lake Placid Town Councilman Gregg Sapp tendered his resignation from that board, effective this past New Year's Eve. Form 6 requires elected officials to reveal any and all assets they have in excess of \$1,000 – a mandate some have felt to be too intrusive.

Officials in Orange City, Daytona Beach Shores and North Palm Beach and Eagle Lake city councils have vacated their seats due to the measure.

The heartland American-Israeli Initiative will have a very special guest this morning as nationally known speaker Laurie Cardoza Moore comes to their first meeting of 2024. Moore is an expert on Israel and is expected to address the current situation in the

Middle East, as well as talking about what students are learning about world events and other topics.

That session will commence at 11:45 this morning at the Inn on the Lakes in Sebring.

The 2024 12 Hours of Sebring won't be here until March, but officials say Fan of the year Nominations for this year now are open.

Every year the Sebring Fan of The Year Advisory Board chooses one person as the "Sebring Fan of the Year". To nominate yourself or a friend, be sure to include:

- Nominee's full name
- hometown
- years of attendance
- pictures
- and why he or she should be nominated.

Deadline for nominations is Saturday, January 27, 2024. Nominations should be emailed to: 12hrFOTYAB@gmail.com

JANUARY 11

Once some of the highest electric bills in the nation, a new survey shows that residents in Sebring pay, on average, less than others in Florida on their utility bills.

The US Utilities Market Size & Household Spending report indicates those in the Sebring area pay an average of \$260 per month for utilities, while the statewide average per month is \$335. The National average stands at \$350 per month.

The survey indicates that the cost of living in Sebring is about 30-percent below both the statewide and national averages for the 10 most common household bills.

Florida Highway Patrol troopers are working a couple of Highlands County accidents. One was on State Road 66 near Fox Road – reportedly the eastbound lane is open to traffic, the other was at Washington Blvd NE and Humphrey Ave in Lake Placid – that scene has been cleared.

Highlands County school officials have announced that like other school systems across the state, they did receive a hoax email. Local authorities worked with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office on the matter,

It was determined that the hoax was not a credible threat. However, out of an abundance of caution, law enforcement assessed campuses that received the email to verify that there was no threat.

It appears the email did not originate locally, and it was intended to cause disruptions to

schools across Florida.

There was no danger to Highlands County schools at any time and no interruptions to the instructional day.

Highlands's officials did not reveal the nature of the email or to whom it was sent.

JANUARY 12

Sebring police are looking for information in connection with an early morning shooting incident in the Washington Heights neighborhood. Officers in the area of Lemon Street and Dr Martin Luther King jr Boulevard heard shots being fired shortly before 1:00 this morning.

When they arrived at the scene, there was nobody there and nobody saw anything.

Later, two gunshot victims showed up at the hospital with what were described as non-life threatening injuries.

Anyone with information on the incident is being asked to contact the Sebring police.

The Polk County firefighters union is appealing what it calls an unjust termination.

Polk County Fire Rescue Battalion Chief Charles True was fired last week for insubordination, failure to supervise and untruthfulness.

His boss says True didn't follow orders, and it wound up costing the department about 60-thousand dollars. The allegation goes back to August when True and a crew were in Levy County cleaning up after Hurricane Idalia.

He was told to have his crew work 12-hour shifts, but they worked 24-hour shifts instead for about a week. True had been with the department for almost 20 years.

The union that represents True tells maintains that True was "an outstanding employee," and the union would "...continue to aggressively defend their members' rights."

JANUARY 15

Today is the birthday of civil rights' icon Dr. Martin Luther King jr. Government offices, banks, many businesses and schools are closed today in observance. Motorists are cautioned to look out for youngsters who may be out and about during normal school times.

There will be a number of parades in Highlands County today. Lake Placid will be first with a processional in Highway Park. They'll begin line up at 10am at the gas station,

then parade up Cressmore Drive and down to the Martin Luther King jr Complex. There also will be a processional in Avon Park. That one will start lining up around 11am at RCMA Hopewell on Earnest E. Sims Street.

It's put on by the Southside Community Resource Center, with refreshments and activities at the MLK Sports Complex following the processional.

In Sebring, there also will be a parade today honoring Dr. King. Staged by "Highlands County Citizens with Voices," the processional will begin on East Center Avenue around noon, it will run to the Historic Circle, then up North Ridgewood Drive to North Pine – then up to Lemon Avenue to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Boulevard. There will be a community picnic at the Bountiful Blessings Church following that one.

A Polk County man appears to be the victim of a deadly hit-and-run. FHP says the body of a 55-year-old Lakeland man was found yesterday afternoon in Hillsborough County. A driver reported seeing the body on the shoulder of I-75 North near mile marker 247. Troopers believe he may have been hit by a large red vehicle that fled the scene.

JANUARY 16

Sebring city council members will get together this evening for their second session of the New Year.

Among other things, they will be making plans for the March downtown celebration of this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring. They also will get a presentation and update on the Washington Heights neighborhood from resident Ada McGowan.

In other action the council will be tracking a couple of pieces of state legislation – one is HB 777 relating to municipal water & sewer utility rates and HB 569 relating to sovereign immunity.

Highlands County commissioners were to have met this morning, but because of the Martin Luther King holiday observance yesterday, that session has been pushed back to Thursday morning.

A Sebring man reportedly was involved in an early morning traffic accident in Hardee County. According to Florida Highway Patrol reports, the semi-tractor trailer rig was westbound on Highway 64 just outside of Zolfo Springs, when he ran over a pedestrian that was laying in the roadway -shortly before 4:00 this morning.

The pedestrian was pronounced dead at the scene. FHP troopers say at this point, he remains unidentified.

The accident remains under investigation. So far, no charges have been filed.

Once again, a part of Avon Park is under a boil water notice. There was a break in a six-inch main at North Lake Avenue and Raymond Street last night. Officials shut down that portion of the service to make repairs.

Citizens on Whitney Street, West Orange Street, West Raymond Street, West Sunshine Lane and West Kathleen Street now are under a 72-hour boil water notice.

To complicate matters, early this morning a motorist drove into a hole caused by the break and had to be towed out.

Last year, Florida District 35 State Representative Fred Hawkins gave up his seat to become the president at South Florida State College.

Today, voters in parts of Orange and Osceola counties will be going to the polls to decide on his replacement. In the running are Kissimmee Republican Erika Booth. She is running against Orlando Democrat Tom Keen for the post.

JANUARY 18

Highlands County commissioners met this morning in a session that was pushed back two days, due to the observance of the Martin Luther King jr. holiday. They systematically dissolved a number of special benefit districts, created to underwrite volunteer fire units throughout the county.

However, with the consolidation of units into a single county-wide unit, the districts no longer are needed. They emphasized the action did not dissolve the fire units, nor did it have any effect on the countywide fire assessment, which will continue to be levied on citizens.

In other action the commission rezoned a 14-acre tract of land from agriculture to a planned unit development to allow a housing project on the property.

There were some tense moments when a Sebring Middle School student was hit by a car. Reports indicate the youngster was pedaling a bicycle across the intersection of South Commerce Avenue and the Sebring Parkway yesterday morning when he was clipped.

The youngster was taken to the hospital with what were described as minor injuries.

Polk County Sheriff's deputies are conducting a death investigation at this hour. It is at the Shell gas station on Highway 60 across from Saddlebag Lake Resort in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge.

No details are available, save witness reports that it seems to involve a white sport utility vehicle.

Parents in Polk County can now volunteer to review books that are being challenged by others. The school district announced this week it's looking for volunteers to review challenged books.

Parents, guardians, teachers, guidance counselors, certified media specialists and high school students all are eligible for the program.

Applicants will be randomly selected and notified by February 2nd. A similar effort has been tried in Highlands County with limited success.

JANUARY 19

A housefire had safety services busy this morning. The blaze broke out at a home on Cocoa Palm Drive shortly before 5: AM.

Units from Desoto City and West Sebring were among those responding to the call. One person was taken to the hospital with smoke inhalation.

Authorities say some animals at the home were rescued – one chicken reportedly died in the incident.

Cause of the fire remains under investigation.

The Highlands County fire assessment got a shot in the arm from taxpayers yesterday. As Highlands County commissioners systematically dismantled a series of special taxing districts, they took more than \$870,000 in delinquent funds from the districts and transferred them to the county's ongoing fire assessment.

Commissioners were quick to point out that despite the elimination of the districts, neither the fire departments, nor the county's fire assessment would be going away due to their action.

Highlands county crews were called out again yesterday to clean up hundreds of nails and screws that were dumped near the bridge on Arbuckle Creek road. Apparently, there's a bump there, and those with loads of construction & demolition debris – as well as other refuse – hit the rise, and leave some of the junk that is loose.

Residents in the area say it's not a new problem, they suffer constantly from trash and other rubble left along the road from what they contend are uncovered loads.

County officials remind residents that loads headed for the landfill must be covered, and should have a tarp underneath to contain the rubbish until it's ready to be dumped.

Folks may see some activity on the historic Circle in downtown Sebring today, as local Rotarians get ready for the 12th Annual Crazy Pepper Chili Cook-off. The event will commence tomorrow with food trucks, live music, a car show and plenty of chili.

Organizers say there are nearly 20 contestants this year, but a few spots still are open

for some last minute teams.
Cooking starts tomorrow morning at 9am.

JANUARY 22

Hot on the heels of this year's holiday season, Avon Park city council members will be talking about how to decorate the City of Charm for Christmas this year when they meet tonight in regular session. A number of groups in the area have volunteered to help out, but want the city to purchase the lights and such.

According to reports, the city of Sebring pays in excess of \$18,000 for the Christmas decorations and events on the Circle each year.

In other action, the council will look at health insurance benefits and recognize Avon Park Chief Andrew Marcy for his being named Firefighter of the year by American Legion Post #69.

Residents may soon be seeing a big white survey boat cruising Lake Jackson and Little Lake Jackson.

The SurvTech craft will be surveying those, as well as lakes Letta, Lotela and Eva.

Those lakes were chosen by the Southwest Florida Water Management District to collect data on the depth and flow of the water, and to establish guidance levels for the lakes.

There's no word on when those figures will be available.

Highlands county firefighters had a couple of calls over the weekend. First, units from West Sebring were assisted by Florida Forest service crews in containing a brush fire off Blueberry Lane. The flames charred about an acre there.

Crews were called out yesterday afternoon to extinguish a house fire on West Josephine Road. The call came in around 2:00. Units from Desoto City, Lake Placid and Placid Lakes responded to the blaze.

Reportedly, the house was totally involved in flames when firefighters arrived at the scene.

No injuries were reported. Cause remains under investigation. The structure is said to be a total loss.

Three people were injured when a plane went down in a remote area of Florida. In all, there were six occupants of the Quest Aircraft Kodiak 100, that ended up upside down in a field off O'Neal Road.

According to reports, the flight was on its way from the Florida Keys when it went down. So far there's no word why. The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

At least one person had to be airlifted to a trauma center yesterday when the car they were in hit a utility pole in Sebring. Lakeview Drive was closed for a time while the pole was replaced.

No names or other details have yet been released.

JANUARY 23

One person was killed and another was injured yesterday evening when a car and motorcycle collided at the intersection of Memorial Drive and the Sebring Parkway. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a car driven by a Sebring woman made a left turn in front of the oncoming motorcycle.

The 23-year-old Sebring man was pronounced dead at the scene. The Sebring woman was taken to the hospital with minor injuries.

The Northbound lanes of Highway 27 near the entrance to Sun 'N Lakes were shut down for a time due to a traffic mishap with injuries.

The roadway is open, but motorists still should expect some delays in the area.

Fire/Rescue units from Sun 'N Lakes and the City of Sebring were dispatched to the Placid Lakes boat ramp on Lake Placid last night to help a boater in distress. Reportedly, Sebring deployed their boat to help the man, whose craft reportedly was having mechanical issues.

He was towed in without incident.

Pickleball is coming to Avon Park. City council members, sitting as the Community Redevelopment Agency last night heard about plans to convert the tennis courts at Donaldson Park into Pickelball courts.

The effort is being spearheaded by local businessman Bill Jarret. CRA Executive Director Shawn Holiday says they may be able to get as many as a half dozen courts out of the current area.

Officials of the Avon Park Shuffleboard Association have volunteered to oversee the courts, once they are installed.

A search is underway in Polk County to find a man considered armed and dangerous. The sheriff's office announced yesterday that Enrique Martinez is wanted for charges that include murder.

The 26-year-old lives in a homeless camp in Winter Haven, and he's accused in the shooting death of another homeless man in the camp in November.

Sheriff Grady Judd says Martinez is also a suspect in the death of a 20-year-old woman

who was reported missing last week. Martinez' criminal history includes over two dozen felonies and misdemeanors.

Martinez is described as 5-foot-6, 146 pounds with brown eyes, black hair, a tattoo on his left wrist and one on the left side of his neck. A 10-thousand dollar reward is available for information that leads to his capture.

JANUARY 24

Residents in the Avon Park area are abuzz over not one, not two, but as many as five large planes they say have the appearance of airliners being flown into the Avon Park Bombing Range.

Pictures and video of the aircraft have been posted on social media.

There have been reports that the Biden administration has been using military bases to dispense illegal aliens throughout the United States.

So far, Air Force range officials have had no comment on the issue. Local residents say it's not the first time there's been such air traffic.

Highlands County School Board members last night approved an engagement agreement with the law firm of Gray/Robinson for limited representation for the district. The move came in response to what school board chair Jan Shoop called "a demand letter" from the Freedom From Religion foundation.

The letter contends that an unnamed "concerned community member" had charged that the board regularly opens the meeting with Christian prayer. The group has wants the board simply to go to a moment of silence – there was no action on the matter indicated if the board declined the request.

A homeless man wanted for two murders is in custody in Polk County.

Sheriff Grady Judd yesterday announced the arrest of Enrique Martinez in Eagle Lake.

The 26-year-old is accused of killing 33-year-old Edil Rodriguez in November in Eloise and 20-year-old Sierra Hernandez this month.

Judd says others who helped Martinez avoid capture have also been arrested.

Heard Bridge Road at the Peace River Bridge north of Wauchula was closed for several hours yesterday while Hardee County sheriff's deputies closed in on and finally arrested a man wanted on several counts.

A homeless man, identified as 31-year-old Jimmy Johnson is facing a number of charges, including resisting arrest and attempted murder of a law enforcement officers after he took a shot at deputies.

Authorities say Johnson tried a number of things to avoid capture – including jumping into the Peace River.

JANUARY 26

A new survey shows when it comes to housing Highlands County is younger than a lot of places. The survey by Construction Coverage shows that the median age of homes in the Sebring-Avon Park metro area is 35 years, with half of its housing stock built before 1987.

The national average is 41 years.

Nevertheless, only 6.8-percent of the homes here have been built since 2010.

JANUARY 29

It may not come as news, but local rents are going up. A new survey by Construction Coverage shows that since last year, rents have jumped more than 11-percent locally. The report indicates that the average rent in the Avon Park – Sebring metro area was \$1,134. That's now jumped to \$1,261.

Still, that's not as big an increase as shown across the country. Nationally, rents have jumped some 12.6-percent over the past year.

A man is accused of driving drunk and going the wrong way in Polk County.

Hillsborough County's Craig Hilgenberg was arrested yesterday morning in Lakeland on I-4 West at mile marker 32.

Florida Highway Patrol reports show the 37-year-old refused to pull over, and troopers had to use a PIT maneuver to get him to stop.

Hilgenberg refused to take a breathalyzer or do a field sobriety test, but troopers say his breath smelled of alcohol and he was slurring his words.

JANUARY 30

Officials at the Avon Park Air Force Range yesterday had advised people through social media that they would be hosting exercises that would be loud. They weren't kidding. There were calls and posts throughout the evening asking about the loud "booms" –

some loud enough to rattle windows. Never fear, it was just some practice, that went late into the night.

Bombing Range authorities warn that the exercises will continue through the end of the week, and will continue to be loud.

A Highlands County ranch is one of three in Florida that will be getting state money through the Rural & Family Lands Protection Program. Albritton's Hart Pasture – a 1,600 acre cow/calf operation with seasonal hay & sod production is in line for some \$4.8 million dollars as part of the program.

The Rural & Family Lands Protection Program purchases the development rights to agricultural properties – which prevents the future development of the land.

Other ranches in Baker and Gilchrist County also are part of the program.

A Polk County man is facing charges for a deadly hit-and-run. Winter Haven's Wayne Berry was arrested yesterday for a crash Saturday. The sheriff's office says the 38-year-old was driving a pickup truck that hit a motorcycle on Cypress Gardens Boulevard. The motorcyclist was thrown off his bike and died at the scene. He was 26-year-old Reuben Goss. Deputies say Berry was eventually found at his home and arrested. He's facing charges that include DUI manslaughter. Sheriff Grady Judd says Berry has a history of drunk driving charges, and he has had his license suspended several times.

JANUARY 31

Firefighters across Highlands County were busy overnight. First, units from the City of Sebring responded to a warehouse fire on Commercial Drive just north of the Fairmount shopping plaza.

The call went out shortly after 7:30.

There were no injuries reported. Cause of the fire was not released. It's unknown what was in the warehouse.

Units from Desoto City were called to a mobile home fire in Lorida early this morning. That one occurred on Irishg Drive shortly before 5am. According to reports, the trailer was fully involved in flames when firefighters arrived at the scene.

Apparently, the occupants were able to escape without incident. No injuries were reported. Cause remains under investigation.

Preparations continue for the 2024 edition of the Highlands County Fair. In addition to the standard fare such as booths, exhibits and livestock displays, organizers say Ridehoffer Rides will have a number of new attractions.

The fair will open Friday evening.

Highlands County Health officials are issuing another alert about blue-green algae. The toxic organisms have been found floating in the water off the Lake Glenada boat ramp in Avon Park, and the Lake Placid boat ramp.

The alert comes after water samples were taken in the areas earlier this month.

Residents are urged not to come in contact with the toxins, and to keep pets away as well.

FEBRUARY 1

Final preparations are underway for tomorrow's opening of the Highlands County Fair. Gates will open tomorrow evening at 5:00 with Highlands Radio Group Day. On stage at the Alan Jay Arena will be the Junior Miss Highlands County Pageant.

New this year will be Magic by Nelson, Chainsaw Artist Rodney Green and the Sea Lion Splash. Reithoffer Rides also promise some new attractions.

The Southbound Lanes of Highway 27 in Sebring were blocked for a time yesterday morning when a car overturned. Witnesses say the vehicle was northbound when it rolled, ending up in the southbound lanes.

There's no indication on how the mishap occurred or the extent of injuries.

The Haines City Police Department, in cooperation with Polk County Sheriff's deputies, yesterday captured four illegal aliens linked to a burglary spree.

The arrests include Gabriel Acosta, Saul Contreras, Wandry Alcantara, and David Herrera. According to reports a security guard noticed suspicious activity involving the theft of household appliances from new construction homes and notified law enforcement. Responding officers tracked down and intercepted a vehicle believed to be used in the crime. A pursuit ensued and the vehicle crashed with the suspects fleeing on foot. In the vehicle officers found stolen appliances w, directly linking the suspects to the burglaries. They were identified and booked into the Polk County jail.

FEBRUARY 2

Highlands County sheriff's deputies were called to the hospital last night when a patient showed up with a bullet wound. Apparently, the injury is not life-threatening, but detectives are having a difficult time trying to find out when, where, why and how it happened.

Units from Lake Placid were called to a structure fire last night on Orange Road NE. Turns out it was an electric recliner that got overheated. Firefighters extinguished the flames and dragged the chair outside before the fire could spread. No injuries were reported in the incident.

The Welcome to Sun 'N Lake sign reportedly took a lick last night. Apparently, a motorist on Highway 27 lost control, went off the road and hit the concrete structure. No serious injuries were reported, but the sign was damaged. Early reports indicate the breaks gave out on the car.

The 87th annual Highlands County Fair opens today in Sebring. Organizers are trying a new method of ticketing, requiring patrons to go on line and get a QR code to get in. They say the new procedure will be easy, and will allow people to skip the lines. Inside this year's fair will be plenty of booths exhibits and displays, fair food, carnival rides and entertainment. On tap for this evening are magic shows, the sea lion splash, a blacksmithing demonstration and the Junior Miss Highlands County Pageant. Gates open at 5pm, the fair runs through next Saturday.

Last year, the Sebring Chamber of Commerce relocated to the Circle Theater downtown. Now, officials have announced a capital improvement project to remodel the historic building. They say the refurbishing will include new carpeting, paint and fixtures – as well as some structural items. The program will be for current members of the Chamber who want to get involved. They say they hope to have the improvements done by the end of the year.

The expansion of the Thomas "Flash" Gordon Baseball Museum in Avon Park is getting an old-fashioned boost. They will host the re-creation of a 1932 game between the St. Louis Cardinals and the House of David Longbeards tomorrow at Head Field. Organizers are asking participants to come dressed as residents of the 1920's. Admission is free and there will be free hot dogs and popcorn. They also plan to film a black & white silent film of the game and the crowd, gates will open tomorrow afternoon at 2:00.

FEBRUARY 5

Highlands County is awash with new royalty. No fewer than four girls were crowned in pageants over the weekend at the Highlands County Fair. It began Friday evening when Carly Vega was tapped as Junior Miss Highlands County on Highlands Radio Group Day. Wearing the tiara as Miss Highlands County this year

will be Lauren Lower.

Teen Miss Highlands County is Braylyn Cassill – she also was voted "People's Choice" in that competition.

Little Miss Highlands County for 2024 is Kiley Lang.

It's day four at the Highlands County Fair – that means that admission will be half price when the gates open this afternoon at 5pm. On tap for today will be the Commercial Heiffer Show & Showmanship, and the Pee Wee Show for youngsters with large animals. The Sea Lion Splash Show has a trio of performances with blacksmithing and chain saw carvings also on the schedule.

The fair runs through Saturday.

A traffic stop turned into a drug bust for Hardee County Sheriff's deputies. After being pulled over for a possible window tint infraction, deputies smelled the aroma of burnt marijuana coming from a vehicle being driven by Alfredo Barcenas.

A subsequent search found multiple baggies, a scale and a green leafy substance.

Barcenas reportedly also had a glass pipe and a crystal substance in his pocket.

The Wauchula man now has been charged with multiple counts including; Possession of Drug Equipment, Possession of Marijuana, Possession of a Controlled Substance, Possession of Cocaine, and Cocaine Distribution within 1000 feet of a place of worship. He was booked into the Hardee county jail.

A Lake Wales man reportedly was killed in a Polk County traffic accident over the weekend. According to reports, 33-year-old Max Beagen was riding his motorcycle on the New Tampa Highway, when a pickup went left of center in an attempt to pass a cement mixer.

Beagen's Suzuki hit the truck head on. He was thrown from the bike, and the Chevy overturned. Beagen was pronounced dead at the scene. Florida Highway Patrol Troopers say there was low visibility due to fog. The incident remains under investigation.

FEBRUARY 6

Highlands County Sheriff's Deputies continue to search for Herman Hernandez. He's a suspect in a domestic violence incident.

Hernandez last was last shortly after 9:00 last night near Hall Road and SR 70.

He is described as a Hispanic male with brown eyes and hair; with a moustache and stocky build. Hernandez was wearing jeans and a dark shirt when last seen.

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

State Road 66 in Hardee County remains closed, while an investigation continues following a crash there. The accident reportedly was at the end of a high-speed chase that came out of Highlands County.

There was a shooting in Sebring yesterday. It happened sometime between 3:30 and 4:00 in the Washington Heights area. The victim was airlifted to a trauma center in Tampa.

Police say it is a very active investigation, and at this time, no arrests have been made.

By a 3-2 vote, Highlands County commissioners this morning voted to put a temporary hold on the construction of mobile home parks in Highlands County. The moratorium will be in place until July, while staff researches rules from other counties that regulate development standards for such facilities.

County Attorney Sherry Sutphen reportedly will bring back a draft resolution on the matter for further discussion.

It's Day 5 at the Highlands County fair with another discount day. Prices have been shaved both for admission and arm bands for the Reithoffer Rides.

The Market Steer Show & Showmanship will be held in the livestock arena beginning this evening at 6:30.

The Commercial Heifer Show was held at the fair last night. Showing the Grand Champion was Grace Lynn Miller – who also took Intermediate Showmanship. Reserve Grand Champ was shown by Colton Crofton.

Stella Handly took the blue ribbon in Senior Showmanship, while Junior Grand Showmanship was awarded to Natliee McNabb.

There will be simultaneous prayer meetings tonight in Highlands County. Dubbed "Intersession for Life," the gatherings will be held on the Circles in downtown Sebring and Lake Placid. The sessions are slated to run from 5:00-6:30.

The meetings come just before the Florida Supreme Court will hear arguments to all a pro-abortion state constitutional amendment, sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union and Planned Parenthood to be placed on this year's ballot.

Organizers say the amendment would allow unrestricted abortion-on-demand for any reason.

A Sebring man has been sentenced to better than seven years in prison on drug counts. Rafel Junior Morrero reportedly pleaded guilty last year to counts of distribution of methamphetamine.

In addition to the 100 months in jail, the 33-year-old Morrero will be under an additional three years of supervised release.

A convicted killer in Polk County could learn his fate as soon as today. The penalty phase of Marcelle Waldon's double-murder trial began yesterday. He was found guilty last week of killing former Lakeland City Commissioner Edie Yates Henderson and her husband, David, in their home in 2020. Prosecutors want the death penalty, but Waldon's lawyers want life in prison. The prosecution made its case yesterday, but the 39-year-old Waldon declined to issue a defense. Closing arguments and jury deliberations are expected today.

Highlands County commissioners again will be discussing mobile homes and development standards when they meet this morning in regular session. Commissioners have gone back and forth over the proliferation of such manufactured homes – versus site built houses in the county.

The commission also will receive a report from the Tourist Development Council. Florida officials already have been crowing about the record tourist count for the Sunshine State over the past year.

FEBRUARY 7

It's Day Six at the Highlands County Fair with more livestock shows and plenty of entertainment on tap. Slated for today are Poultry Judging and the Pee Wee Show for youngsters with small animals.

Last night was the Market Steer Show. Showing the Grand Champion there was Autumn Reynolds. Reserve Grand Champion was shown by Kaitlyn Sellers.

The Senior Grand Champion Showmanship ribbon went to Stella Handley, Intermediate went to Grace Lynn Miller while Junior Showmanship was awarded to Natilee McNabb. Tomorrow night will be the livestock auction.

The fair runs through Saturday.

The pursuit of a suspect wanted in connection with a shooting in Sebring, resulted in a couple of crashes and injury to a Highlands County Sheriff's deputy yesterday.

Lawmen spotted a white 2021 Dodge Charger – believed to have been involved in the shooting incident – and tried to pull it over.

However, the driver, identified as 27-year-old Jaquan Salavas Hall of Avon Park, fled down State Road 66 into Hardee County. At one point, Hall spun out and ran head-on into a Highlands Sheriff's cruiser.

The chase continued until Hall again lost control of the charger and rolled it – injuring himself and passengers in the vehicle. They were taken to the hospital, treated and charged.

By a 3-2 margin, Highlands County commissioners yesterday voted to put a temporary hold on the construction of mobile home parks in the county. The moratorium will be in place until July, while staff researches rules from other counties that regulate development standards for such facilities.

County Attorney Sherry Sutphen reportedly will bring back a draft resolution on the matter for further discussion at the next commission meeting.

A Polk County man is facing the death penalty. A jury yesterday recommended that Marcelle Waldon be put to death for killing a couple in Lakeland four years ago. The 39-year-old was convicted last week of first-degree murder.

He stabbed to death former city commissioner Edie Yates Henderson and her husband in the couple's home.

Only eight out of 12 jurors needed to agree to the death penalty, but they got 11 votes. The judge still has to agree with the recommendation before Waldon is sentenced to death.

FEBRUARY 8

It's Thursday at the Highlands County Fair, that means the Junior Livestock Auction will be held in the pavilion beginning at 6pm.

Sponsored by Heartland National Bank, most all the animals shown at the fair this year will go on the auction block to the highest bidder. It's the youngsters' chance to make back the money spent in raising their project.

To help out, many people and businesses contribute cash for "add-ons" to increase the final purchase price.

Also tonight, local recording artist Corey Greenway will take to the stage on the Independent Midway. He'll be performing from 6-9 this evening.

A Lake Placid man again has been arrested on drug charges. Highlands County Sheriff's deputies say Maurice Oxendine was charged after a search warrant turned up a cache of drugs at his Cochrane Drive home.

Among other things, deputies found cocaine, MDVP -also known as "Molly," Xanax and Fentanyl. He has been charged with trafficking, possession with intent to sell and possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony – in addition to other counts. He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

Highlands County commissioners have voted to declare another 300-plus county owned lots as surplus and sold off. Most of the lots are in the Sun 'N Lake Improvement District and came to the county through the tax deed process.

Commissioner Scott Kirouac made an impassioned plea to take some of the revenues, and apply them to the paving of Schumacher Road in an effort to provide a new southern entrance to the housing project.

Commissioner Arlene Tuck expressed concerns about previous financial mismanagement there, while Commissioner Don Elwell said he wanted additional information before making any other decisions on allocations.

How the money may be spent will come back to commissioners at a later date.

FEBRUARY 9

A woman reportedly was injured shortly after midnight this morning while trying to not hit an animal. She reportedly crashed her car on County Road 731 after swerving to avoid the critter.

The unidentified driver reportedly was airlifted out to a trauma center.

There have been exercises all this week at the Avon Park Air Force Range. While it's been a secret who's out there, it's no secret it's been going on. Residents in Avon Park and Sebring have been remarking about the explosions – some big enough to rattle windows and shake houses for miles around.

Reportedly, they'll continue working out there again today.

It's the last couple days at the Highlands County Fair. Slated from 6-to-9 this evening will be music from Justin Grimes in the Budweiser Hospitality Tent sponsored by Spray & Pray Guns & Ammo. At 9pm a Piano Juggler will be on the Sebring Firemen's stage. It's the last chance to see Magic by Nelson, the Sea Lion Splash, as well as the blacksmithing and chain saw artist's displays.

The fair winds up tomorrow.

Some big money spent at the Junior Livestock Auction last night, as the Grand Champion steer shown by Autumn Renyolds went for over \$11,000.

It's going to be a big weekend starting tomorrow, not only will Strapped For Cash be playing on the last day of the Highlands County Fair, the 37th Annual Civilian Conservation Corps festival will be held at Highlands Hammock State Park.

The park's signature event will feature music from the Sebring High School Jazz Band, the Avon Park High Show Choir and the Heart of Highlands Show Chorus.

There will be vendors and exhibitors including quilting, spinning and blacksmithing. Also

offered will be pony rides, carriage rides and tram rides – plus plenty of food. That will run from 10-4.

A pair of early Valentine events also are planned. It's Lovers Night at NASGRASS Florida Flywheeler's Park for the monthly lawn racing event. Heat races will begin at 3pm with features slated to start at 6:00.

In Frostproof, recording artist Corey Greenway & The Outta Hand Band will headline the annual Street Dance on Wall Street. In addition to food truck, this year, organizers have added a Jeep Show & Shine. That gets started in the Friendly City at 6pm.

FEBRUARY 12

It was back to school today for Highlands County students. They've been off since this past Thursday. Motorists are urged to watch out for kids bicycling or walking home from school during the afternoon hours.

The Avon Park city council will convene this evening for their first session of February. Mayor Garrett Anderson again wants to talk about Christmas decorations in the City of Charm. Several service organizations have volunteered to help deck the streets for the holiday season.

In other action the council will look at re-establishing the city's rental inspection process, discuss a lien reduction program and officially will meet the new Avon Park Public Works Director Jason Atkinson.

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives are investigating a weekend fatal shooting incident. It apparently took place early Saturday morning on Golf Villas Court NW in Placid Lakes.

Witnesses say the victim's body was found near his parked car, in a parking lot adjacent to an apartment complex. His name has not been released.

Sheriff's officials say there were indications of car burglaries in the area, and detectives are trying to determine if the burglaries and shooting are related.

Major competitors for this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring will get a taste of the historic track this week, as the raceway holds a special test and tune session. Expected to be in are last year's winners of the 12, The Action Express Cadillac as well as the winners of this year's Rolex 24, the Porsche Penske Motorsport Team.

Track officials have hinted that the new Lamborghini SC63 may make it's on track debut as part of the test week. The event is not open to the public, but those having lunch at Seven – the Sebring Raceway Hotel – may catch a preview of some of the cars at the historic hairpin turn.

FEBRUARY 13

Motorists driving through Sebring tomorrow will have to budget some extra time. Ridgewood Drive from the Parkway to NE Lakeview Drive will be shut down from 7am until 7pm.

The closure will include the Historic Circle and all the spoke streets to Wall Street. There is a similar road closure planned for next Monday, February 19th.

The Highlands County Sheriff's office will be launching a body cam pilot program tomorrow. There will be 15 deputies involved. There will be five each from the patrol, detention and school resource divisions that will be wearing the cameras.

In all, the Sheriff's Office has purchased 180 of the Axon units and the associated hardware at just over \$1.4 million dollars.

The pilot program is slated to run about a month.

The Highlands County School Board will meet tonight in regular session. Among other things, they are slated to look at a number of different policies – including one regarding public participation in their meetings and workshops. The new policy apparently involves sweeping changes on how citizens will be allowed to address the board and issues of concern.

In other action, they will look at a data privacy agreement with the Amplify Education Company.

After a lengthy discussion, Avon Park city council members last night decided NOT to revive a rental inspection process. The policy was enacted nearly 20 years ago, to help with the problem of illicit camps for fruit harvesters that were established in R-1 zoning. The idea was inspectors could find bunking facilities that would provide for more than legal occupancy.

In turning back the idea, council members heard advice from their attorney Gerald Buhr, who called it a "minefield of liability."

You can run, but you cannot hide from the Highlands County Sheriff's office K-9 Corps. This time it was K-9 Gentry that made the collar. Authorities say it all started yesterday with an attempted traffic stop in Lake Placid.

The driver of the car, identified as 26-year-old Devin Austin Donnelly first took his time before stopping, then fled the scene near Highway 27 & County Road 29.

The track led along the shore of Lake Placid, then into the water. Gentry followed the trail, then swam to a patch of thick vegetation, when deputies heard a voice shout "He got me!"

Donnelly was extricated and charged with fleeing to elude, driving without a license and resisting arrest. He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

The Sebring track test for cars registered in this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac will continue today. Yesterday, a number of GT cars tried the historic circuit, today, the GTP cars are slated for some trial runs – including the new Lamborghini SC-63.

The track is not open to the public, however fans taking lunch at Seven- The Sebring Raceway Hotel – may see some of the action at the famous Hairpin Turn.

One person has been killed in a Polk County mobile home fire.

Crews were called out to the Lake View RV Park in Lake Alfred during the early morning hours. Firefighters say they weren't able to get inside the home until the situation was under control.

The victim was found dead at the scene. The state fire marshal is investigating the cause.

FEBRUARY 14

Motorists driving through Sebring today will have to budget some extra time.

Ridgewood Drive from the Parkway to NE Lakeview Drive is shut down until 7:00 this evening.

The closure will include the Historic Circle and all the spoke streets to Wall Street.

The detours reportedly are being done to allow a film crew in, to do unobstructed shots of the downtown area in preparation for a possible HGTV special on the city.

There is a similar road closure planned for next Monday, February 19th. That will be for a rally that's planned to show the pride Sebring has in their community.

The Highlands County Sheriff's office launched their body cam pilot program today.

There will be 15 deputies involved, five each from the patrol, detention and school resource divisions that will be wearing the cameras.

In all, the Sheriff's Office has purchased 180 of the Axon units and the associated hardware at just over \$1.4 million dollars.

The pilot program is slated to run about a month.

A controversial policy on public participation in meetings and workshops was pulled from the agenda last night at the Highlands County School Board meeting.

The new policy apparently involves sweeping changes on how citizens will be allowed to address the board and issues of concern.

Saying she wanted the board to "get it right," Nicole Radonski made the motion to

move the item to a later school board workshop for further review.
In other action, the board voted to ink an agreement with "Choices" for their "Relationships Under Construction" program as part of the sex education curriculum.

After a year of advertising and interviewing candidates, the city of Avon Park finally has a public works director. City council members officially met Jason Atkinson at their meeting this week.

Atkinson comes from Miami, and will be moving to the City of Charm. Reportedly, he's been on the job for about three weeks now and has been hard at work. Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader said that Atkinson soon will be put on a number of "big projects that are on the horizon."

A crash with a tanker truck is blamed for causing a mess in Polk County. The truck hit a car yesterday in Willow Oak on SR 60 West at Turner Road. The truck wound up on its side, diesel fuel spilled onto the road, and it was shut down for cleanup. Polk sheriff's officials say no one was killed, but there were some injuries. No details have been released. The road is expected to be open this morning.

FEBRUARY 15

It now will be a bit less difficult to purchase properties with big liens on them in Avon Park. City council members have enacted a program that will allow an easy-payment plan for those having to pay off thousands of dollars in accrued fines and hard costs on properties that have been in violation of code enforcement issues for quite some time. Council members hope the program will help get those properties back on the tax rolls.

Traffic was stacked up on State Road 70 at County Road 721 for a time this morning due to a two car crash. There reportedly were no injuries, but both vehicles apparently are on fire.

Two people were taken to the hospital after four vehicles collided on Highway 27 North in Sebring yesterday. According to reports, three cars and a semi-tractor trailer rig were involved in the tangle. Sebring police have released no other details.

A woman was injured yesterday when she was run over by a truck in the parking lot of the Avon Park Walmart. She reportedly was flown to a trauma center.

Nearly two dozen units turned out to douse the flames at a mobile home fire in East Lake Wales yesterday. Authorities say the trailer house was fully involved in flames when

firefighters arrived at the Dog Yard Road address.

There were no injuries in the incident. Cause of the blaze remains under investigation.

FEBRUARY 16

A new dining experience is coming to The City of Charm. According to reports, Maxwell Groves in Avon Park is ramping up to launch a Food Truck Park on their property.

It will begin on March first, when they hold a Food Truck Night at their location off East Circle Street. Owners say their goal is to work towards hosting food trucks every FIRST and THIRD weekend of the month.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say citizen cooperation can help send bad guys to jail. After a public plea, they have been able to identify a suspect in a Placid Lakes case. A resident noticed somebody taking mail out of a mail box. In fact, several mailboxes were pilfered – and detectives say – some people still may not know their mail was taken by an unauthorized person.

After several reports, a car and driver were identified in the case. So far, no names or other information have been released.

Those wanting to run for the upcoming Lake Placid Town Council election have until noon today to get their paperwork filed for the April second balloting. So far, five people have picked up packets in search of the two seats that will come open.

The new packets also include the controversial Form 6 – which mandates candidates reveal any holdings or possessions they have that are valued at over \$1,000.

It's going to be a big weekend in Florida's Heartland. The Cracker Trail Riders will be assembling in Bradenton tomorrow for next week's cross-state ride. They'll be coming through Hardee County on Tuesday and on Wednesday will make their traditional half-way crossing at Highway 27 here in Highlands County.

Tomorrow is Tire Amnesty Day in Hardee County. They will be accepting old tires free all day at the Hardee Landfill in Wauchula in an effort to reduce the mosquito population there.

In Frostproof, the 22nd Annual Orange Blossom Festival and Car Show will be held tomorrow on Wall Street from 9 to 3. In addition to the classic, custom and vintage cars, there will be vendors, a kid zone and live music.

FEBRUARY 19

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives continue the investigation into the death of Darron "Darryl" Taylor. The 61-year-old Sebring man was found shot and killed early Sunday morning in his home on Muriel Avenue by Emergency Medical Services workers, responding to a call of "no vitals."

Authorities now are looking for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators. Tipsters can either call the Highlands County Sheriff's office or the confidential Crimestoppers Hotline at 1-800-400-TIPS (8477).

Sebring officials will be shutting down the Historic Circle today for a rally, to hear whether or not they got the nod to be the target of an HGTV television show, that would give the city a makeover.

Although officially unnamed, it is speculated that it could be for an upcoming episode of "Hometown Takeover." In the past, hosts of that show have come in and revamped Fort Morgan, Colorado and Wetumpka, Alabama.

Reportedly, the choice is down to two municipalities. The official announcement is planned for 2:30 this afternoon.

A couple of Sebring women have been arrested in connection with a string of mail thefts. 29-year-old Kimberly Michelle Shrewsbury and 35-year-old Stephanie Hope Spurlock have been charged with 30 counts of possession of personal identification without consent.

Highlands County sheriff's officials say the investigation was aided by residents who provided photos and video. They say additional charges may be forthcoming.

A Highlands County man was involved in a fatal traffic crash in Hardee County. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 49-year-old Sebring man was driving a sport utility vehicle on State Road 64, and had pulled out to pass a pick-up, when he hit an oncoming 3-wheeled motorcycle.

The motorcyclist, a 58-year-old Zolfo Springs man died in the crash. Although all three vehicles were gathered up in the mishap, there were no other serious injuries. No charges have been filed.

Apparently, there will be no municipal elections this year in Lake Placid or Frostproof, as only one person qualified for each of the available seats. In Lake Placid, incumbents Charlie Wilson and Ray Royce filed for their seats. However, incumbent Gregg Sapp did not file for election. Former councilwoman Debroah Worley DID file for that seat. She reportedly will be added to the council at the next meeting.

In Frostproof, incumbents Lesie Brewer and Tashana True were the only qualifying candidates for the two open seats there.

The Cracker Trail riders saddled up and headed out yesterday on their annual cross-state trek. They are expected to be in Hardee County tomorrow and in Highlands on Wednesday for their annual crossing of Highway 27. That marks the half-way point in their ride.

FEBRUARY 20

Hundreds of people turned out yesterday afternoon to hear the official announcement that the city of Sebring will be the subject of HGTV's "Hometown Takeover" program. That's where professional designers come in and re-do businesses, homes and public spaces to make an area more attractive.

Apparently, the project is being done in cooperation with the Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency, which has spent three decades reducing slum & blight in the City on the Circle.

The project is slated to take about four months to complete.

By a 3-2 vote, Highlands County commissioners this morning voted to enact a four month moratorium on the acceptance, processing and/or consideration of any petition, application or request on lands for mobile home parks.

A number of projects already in process reportedly will not be affected by the moratorium – while commissioners look at rules and regulations for such developments.

The Florida Cracker Trail riders will continue to make their way through Hardee County today. The group will be riding along State Road 64 West.

The plan is to stay overnight near Zolfo Springs, and head into Highlands County tomorrow. Here, the riders and waggoneers will stop by the Cracker Trail Elementary School and make their traditional half-way crossing on Highway 27.

Motorists in the area are urged to watch out and use caution.

Highlands County commissioners will take formal action today on a temporary moratorium on zoning lands for mobile home parks. They will hold a public hearing on the matter before taking final action.

Commissioners also will consider the adoption of a half dozen zoning changes, moving better than 600 acres from Conservation & Management Lands to an Agricultural designation.

They also are slated to take action overhauling the boardroom's audio-visual equipment. That's expected to take about \$150,000.

FEBRUARY 21

By a 3-2 vote, Highlands County commissioners yesterday voted to enact a four-month moratorium on the acceptance, processing and/or consideration of any petition, application or request on lands for mobile home parks.

A number of projects already in process here reportedly will not be affected by the moratorium – while commissioners look at rules and regulations for such developments.

The 2024 edition of the Florida Cracker Trail Ride will arrive in Highlands County today. The riders and waggoneers spent the night near Zolfo Springs in Hardee County, and will arrive here this morning. They first will stop by the Cracker Trail Elementary School for a visit, a whip-cracking demonstration and a history lesson.

Around noon today, they will ride up State Road 66 and across Highway 27. That marks the half-way point in their cross-state trek. They'll spend the night at the Smith Ranch.

They'll begin loading cars in today for this weekend's Sportscar Vintage Racing Association's SpeedTour home opener. It's both the first race of the season for the SVRA and the Trans-Am series – both of which got their start here in Sebring.

There will be an optional test day tomorrow for competitors. More than 200 cars and drivers are expected in for this weekend's event.

FEBRUARY 22

The problems reported this with AT&T or First Net cell phones reportedly now may have expanded to Verizon, T-Mobile, Boost and others. There has been a nationwide outage that locked many of the phones in SOS mode. So far, company officials have not indicated what has caused the issue.

Among other things, apparently customers are locked out of calling 9-1-1 but they can call the Highlands County Sheriff's office main number at 402-7200.

Test & tune sessions continue today for the Sports Car Vintage Racing Association competitors slated to run this weekend in the SVRA SpeedTour event at the Sebring International Raceway.

In addition to the nearly 200 classic and vintage race cars, the Trans Am Series presented by Pirelli will open their 2024 season as part of the weekend as well.

The Florida Cracker Trail riders made their traditional half-way crossing at Highway 27 yesterday – although they got a little behind schedule for the usual noon parade.

The riders and waggoneers hope to pick up the pace today as they ride out of

Highlands to Okeechobee along US 98. Motorists in the area are urged to use caution as they pass the processional.

FEBRUARY 23

There were reportedly no serious injuries in a single car accident early this morning on County Road 17 south of Avon Park. Reportedly a vehicle went off the road and hit a power pole around 4:30.

Apparently the driver did not need to be transported.

A new survey by Flippa shows that generally, high-income residents pay most of the taxes. But that's not so here in Highlands County.

High earners in the Avon Park/Sebring metro area pay less than one percent of the tax burden. According to the numbers, households earning over \$200,000 a year locally make about \$430,000 and pay an average of \$3,700 in taxes.

That sets Highlands at the fifth lowest for state and local taxes among small metros surveyed.

If you need some help from the Highlands County Veterans service office, you'll have to go to a new location for a while.

The Veteran Services Office on George Blvd. south of Sebring suffered a water pipe break in the building earlier this week.

They were closed yesterday, but will re-open today at the Bert J. Harris Agricultural Civic Center on George Blvd.

The staff will be in Conference Room Three at the back of the building until repairs are made.

Practice and qualifying begins today for the Sportscar Vintage Racing Association and the Trans-Am series presented by Pirelli, as the 2024 SpeedTour event gets underway in earnest. It's the home opener for both the SVRA and Trans-Am, and officials say there are more than 200 cars in the paddock ready to run.

On addition to a series of sprint races, the Optima Search for the Ultimate Street Car and the Haggerty Cars & Caffeine show will be part of the weekend.

The event runs through Sunday.

FEBRUARY 26

There was a scare, but no problems today when Highlands County Fire Rescue crews were called to the Lakeshore Mall. Units from West Sebring and Desoto City responded to the Coast Dental location at the Mall in Sebring after personnel and customers reported the smell of gas there.

The office was evacuated, the cause was investigated, and although a strong odor was detected, the meters were clear. People on scene were checked out, no transports were made.

The Avon Park city council could join in a lawsuit against a new state measure, mandating that local officials fill out the so-called "Form 6." The document demands that those running for office reveal detailed financial holdings, down to anything valued over \$1,000.

Many feel Form 6 is too intrusive, and hundreds of local officials already have stepped down, rather than revealing details of their personal lives.

In other action this evening, the council will consider revocation of residential rental properties regulations, and will hear a proposal from officials of the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce.

One person was killed and another seriously injured in a 3-vehicle accident south of Sebring. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a 16-year-old Sebring girl pulled her Sport Utility Vehicle from Orange Boulevard, across US Highway 27 and into the path of a northbound SUV.

The driver of that vehicle – a 38-year-old Sebring man – was killed. The teen was severely injured. No names were released.

Troopers say the incident remains under investigation.

FEBRUARY 27

Avon Park city council members last night voted to join in with a lawsuit against the so-called 'Form-6.' That's a document that all people running for office now must fill out, that discloses all possessions they have of \$1,000 or more.

Although inaction of the mandate has been pushed back until next year, hundreds of local officials already have stepped down rather than disclose the minute details of their personal holdings.

In other action, the council began proceedings to revoke regulations on residential rental properties. The rules originally were enacted to hobble the establishment of illegal migrant labor camps in residential districts of the City of Charm.

It's getting to be that time of year again – the dry season. Citizens report that fire crews were called out yesterday to extinguish a small brush fire in the front area of the Towne Square plaza parking lot.

The blaze occurred near the plaza's billboard sign. There were no injuries. The extent of damage was not released.

In Polk County, Auburndale Police are alerting the citizenry there about counterfeit currency that's been circulating there.

Recently, there have been incidences involving "movie money". They say if bills have "MOTION PICTURE USE ONLY" stamped on them, they're not actually legal tender.

Authorities caution citizens who come across any counterfeit money, to contact police or sheriff's officials immediately.

FEBRUARY 28

A Sebring resident is looking to breathe life into City of Charm. Jane Benham, who runs the Avon Park Farmer's Market has made a pitch to the Avon Park city council to revive the Main Street program there.

As a 501.(c)(3) organization, the Main Street America's program works to revitalize downtowns and commercial districts through preservation-based economic development and community revitalization.

In the past, there have been Main Street programs both in Sebring and in Avon Park. City council members plan to take the item up at their next March meeting.

FEBRUARY 29

It seems the closer we get to the Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac, the more action picks up at the Sebring International Raceway. Cars and drivers for this Weekends United States Auto Club opener already are loaded in and are ready for today's test sessions.

A record field of more than 60 competitors will run in the Porsche Sprint Challenge North America race. Also on tap are the Blue Marble Radical Cup and Skip Barber Formula Race Weekend.

It's not a ticketed event, but fans still can get lunch at Seven – The Sebring Raceway Hotel – and see cars on the track at the famous Hairpin Turn.

Units from Desoto City were called to an address on Woodbine Avenue after smoke was reported in the house there. Turned out to be a faulty appliance. Firefighters were able to mitigate the situation. There were no injuries and no significant damage was reported.

MARCH 1

Highlands County got two new residents yesterday, who only will celebrate their actual birthdays once every four years. A couple of Leap Year Babies were born yesterday at Advent Health Sebring. Officials there say the first Leaper was a girl, the second Leaping was a boy.

They say moms and kids all are doing just fine.

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies had to work a bit yesterday to round up a couple of suspects.

First, 25-year-old Vincent Luna was arrested after a short search. He was wanted in connection with a domestic violence situation in the Desoto City area south of Sebring. Later, a Polk County man was picked up in connection with a home-invasion style robbery in the Avon Park Lakes area. His name has not been released.

Details of the captures have not been forthcoming.

Practice sessions will continue today for the USAC races being held at the Sebring International Raceway. Participants in the Porsche Sprint Challenge North America races, the Skip Barber Formula series and the Blue Marble Radical cup all will be on track. Qualifying and racing will be held tomorrow. That event runs through Sunday. Although this is not a ticketed event, those grabbing lunch at Seven- The Sebring Raceway Hotel – can see some of the action at the famous Hairpin Turn.

Trade school students at South Florida State College will be able to get some additional help thanks to a new scholarship program. Qualified students will be eligible for \$500, thorough a new BEKA endowment.

The program was established by resident Bert Horowitz in cooperation with the SFSC Foundation

MARCH 5

Highlands County Sheriff's deputies arrested a Frostproof man following an incident in the Highlands Homes area, north of Sebring. According to reports, 31-year-old Eleno Suarez jr was spotted driving a car that had a license tag that actually belonged on another vehicle.

However, when deputies tried a traffic stop, Suarez didn't – but got stuck in a vacant lot. He ran, but K-9s Hooch and Drax were able to sniff him out, hiding in a nearby shed. Suarez was treated by Emergency Medical Services then booked on traffic and firearms charges.

Highlands County commissioners will get together this morning for their first meeting of March. Among other things, the board will be asked to hire a consultant to conduct a retail marketing study of the area – including a psychographic profile of the county's trade area and an update on the county's demographics.

In other action, commissioners will look at bumping the Capital Projects Manager up to a supervisor and approve a job description for a fire inspector post for the county.

The second of three special district meetings will be held this evening. Highlands County staff will hold the sessions to allow residents to come and speak with county officials and express concerns and shared ideas.

Tonight they will be at Highlands Park Estates. That session will commence at the clubhouse at 5:30. Tomorrow they will wind up the sessions in Lake Placid.

There could be a legal fight over the future of a Lake Wales landmark. A judge last week ruled that developer Raymond Brown lied to the city about his plans to turn the Dixie Walesbilt Hotel into residential units. The city could re-take control of the 97-year-old building, but Brown plans to appeal. His lawyer tells News Channel 8 his client has a heart for the project and wants to do everything he can to make it what it should be. The city council will discuss the city's options at today's meeting.

MARCH 6

Highlands County now has a new local candidate. Longtime resident Donald Ridgeway has announced his intention to run for superintendent of schools. Ridgeway has worked for the school board of Highlands County for better than two decades, as a teacher, athletic director, dean of students and a principal.

Ridgeway earned degrees at South Florida State College, Warner Southern, Florida Atlantic, and Arkansas State University.

He will challenge longtime incumbent Brenda Longshore for the superintendent's post.

An Avon Park driver was involved in Hardee County crash that claimed the life of a Wauchula woman. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the Wauchula woman was westbound on State Road 64, when she ran into the back of the Avon Park man's pickup.

She hit the back of the truck, then spun in front of an oncoming semi tractor-trailer rig, which broadsided the car.

The driver was killed and a female passenger was seriously injured. The incident remains under investigation.

Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd has announced 228 arrests as a result of an eight-day human trafficking bust operation dubbed operation March Sadness. It included 21 suspected to be illegal aliens.

Judd said it marked a new record number of arrests during an investigation of this kind. Of the latest arrests, 21 were suspected to be illegal aliens, authorities said. Countries of origin include Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela.

MARCH 7

A Wauchula man has died in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the 63-year-old motorcyclist was eastbound on State Road 62, and was hit from behind by a sport utility vehicle.

The force of the impact sent the biker off his cycle. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The SUV went off the road clipped a fence then hit a tree. That driver sustained minor injuries.

The incident remains under investigation.

The Historic Sportscar Spring Fling races will be held this weekend at the Sebring International Raceway, and although it won't be open to spectators, officials from the lawn mower racers at NASGRASS say their upcoming Snowbird Nationals this weekend will be open to the public.

In fact, they predict a record crowd as they debut their new facility at the Florida Flywheeler's Park. The group has installed additional bleachers, and still are suggesting fans bring folding chairs for the 2-day event which starts tomorrow. Reportedly some camping will be available for the event.

MARCH 8

There's a big race scheduled for this weekend – but it might not be where you think. Lawn mower racers from NASGRASS say their activities will get underway today for the 2024 edition of the Snowbird Nationals.

It's a big deal – this is the first nationals to be held in their new facility at Florida Flywheelers Park off the Avon Park Cutoff Road west of Frostproof, and record crowds are expected. In fact, they've put up extra grandstands – but still are asking people to bring chairs – just in case.

Some campers also have come in for the 2-day event.

Competitors from all over Florida and several from out-of-state have arrived to run in the annual race. Practice will get underway at noon today with heat racing at 3pm and feature racing at 6pm.

The nationals will wind up tomorrow.

Units from Highlands Lakes were called out last night to extinguish a fire in a semi tractor-trailer rig. State Road 64 at Ballard Road was shut down for about an hour while they got the blaze put out. Fortunately, the driver had disconnected the cab before units arrived at the scene.

There were no injuries. The blaze was attributed to mechanical issues. And the load of potatoes – was roasted.

A Wauchula man has died in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the 63-year-old motorcyclist was eastbound on State Road 62, and was hit from behind by a sport utility vehicle.

The force of the impact sent the biker off his cycle. He was pronounced dead at the scene. The SUV went off the road clipped a fence then hit a tree. That driver sustained minor injuries.

The incident remains under investigation.

MARCH 11

Today officially begins Race Week in Highlands County as preparation continues for this year's edition of the Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac. Hundreds of fans are parked in the field across from the Sebring International Raceway – reportedly they will be let in tomorrow.

Historic Sports Car Racing wound up their spring fling at the track yesterday, and workers will begin transforming the 330 acre raceway grounds today in preparations for this year's running of America's Oldest Sports Car endurance race.

It IS Race Week in Highlands County – and that also means it's spring break for schools. There are no classes for students this week. Motorists are cautioned to look out for youngsters outside playing during normal school hours.

It will be a double-header for the Avon Park city council tonight. At 5:00 they will hold a special joint session with the city's Planning & Zoning Board to discuss the use of shipping and cargo containers as storage units around town.

At 6:00 will be the regular council meeting. Among other things, they are slated to take up the shipping container issue again for formal consideration and will take final action on revoking residential property inspection statutes.

Multiple agencies were called out over the weekend to help locate an injured kayaker near the Avon Park Bombing Range. Units from the range, in cooperation with Fish & Wildlife agents and the City of Avon Park worked together to find the kayaker – who was located about three miles south of the boat ramp.

No names have been released. Authorities only say that the injuries were non-life threatening.

A Lake Wales man faces numerous counts, following an altercation in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge. Perry Ford has been charged with shooting into an occupied vehicle and attempted first degree murder in the case.

Police say Ford and Duane Anderson apparently were about to settle a conflict, when the 42-year-old Ford opened fire on Anderson. Anderson fled in his vehicle and was not struck by any of the rounds.

Ford reportedly has been arrested up in Seminole County.

MARCH 12

Race week ramps up in Sebring today, as fans who have been parked across from Gate 4 will be allowed entrance to the Sebring International Raceway to set up camp in their respective areas, to get ready for this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac.

Tonight will be the sixth annual transporter parade through downtown Sebring. Trucks carrying the new GTP hyper cars will make their way around the Circle in a caravan that then will make its way out to the track.

On the Historic Circle there will be music and an appearance by a brace of drivers for the 12 Hours, who will answer questions and sign autographs for the fans.

The Highlands Radio Group will be on scene broadcasting live.

All the activity will begin on the Circle in downtown Sebring at 5:30 this evening.

There was a full frontal assault on the Avon Park administration at last night's city council meeting. It began with resident Emilo Garabaldi complaining that he could not get on the agenda to discuss his proposal for the Main Street property where the Wilde Building once sat. That conversation centered around City Manager Mark Schrader, who had told the developer his ideas did not mesh with the provisions in the city council's published request for proposal.

Councilwoman Shelly Mercure called for a job review for Schrader.

Reading from a prepared statement, resident Stephen Madre called into question Mayor Garrett Anderson's dealing in the acquisition of the Brickell Building. Councilwoman Bernice Taylor then called for an investigation by the State Commission on Ethics, saying she had been provided with a thick packet of evidence. The motion for that investigation failed by a 3-2 vote.

A child is dead after a shooting in Polk County. It happened last night in Lakeland at an apartment complex. Police say a three-year-old and an adult were killed. Another adult was hurt but is expected to survive. No arrest has been announced, and there's no word on a motive.

Two people appear to be behind a series of thefts in Polk County. Lakeland Police announced yesterday that two men were arrested last week for multiple thefts of wire from light poles around the city. They are 46-year-old Toby Ledford and 38-year-old Adam Byrd. Both are from Lakeland. Police say they found in Ledford's car numerous bundles of wire and tools used in the thefts. The LPD says the two admitted they were going to sell the wire to a scrapyard.

MARCH 13

It's officially Race Week in Sebring. Gates were opened yesterday at the Sebring International Raceway and fans began pouring in for the next four days of music, activities and racing action in this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac.

Practice sessions begin this morning for cars in the four support series that will be running sprint races over the next three days – in preparation for the big race. There also will be live music on the Fan Zone stage, and – later this evening – fans can have a beer with Sebring International Raceway President Wayne Estes in the Fan zone as well.

A Sebring man has been arrested in connection with a bank robbery in Lake Wales. 42-year-old Dennis T. Davis is accused of being the man who walked into the Bank of America location, and took cash at gunpoint from the institution.

Police with dogs responded quickly, and reportedly found Davis hiding in some nearby bushes. He was identified by witnesses and taken into custody. Davis was booked into the Polk County jail.

Avon Park city council members, working with the city's planning & zoning board, have decided how to handle a proliferation of shipping containers popping up around town being used for storage.

They will grandfather in the current units, but require that they have a uniform paint scheme, and no more stacking of the containers. Going forward, they will no longer be allowed in residential areas, and semi-trailers also will be prohibited.

MARCH 14

This is Thursday of Race Week and the action picks up significantly today at the Sebring International Raceway with qualifying, racing, and the first on-track appearance of drivers in this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac.

They will have both morning and afternoon sessions – and one of the big draws of Race Week – night practice.

The Whelen Mazda MX-5 Series, The Porsche Carrera Cup and the Lamborghini Super Trofeo all have qualifying sessions and their first races of the weekend today.

Mazda drivers also will have an autograph session this evening.

There also will be qualifying for competitors in the Alan Jay 120 Michelin Pilot Challenge. On stage tonight in the Fan Zone will be RockTown and the Jefferson Starship.

Apparently, the Crown Jewel of the Ridge suddenly has found itself looking for a new police chief.

Lake Wales Police Chief Christopher Velasquez has been suspended, and Lake Wales City Manager James Slaton says they're already looking for a replacement.

In a memo to Velasquez, Slaton accuses him of nepotism, favoritism and a lack of transparency. Velasquez' three-day unpaid suspension begins next week, and the city will start looking for a new chief in April.

Velasquez will remain chief until the city finds a replacement. He has been chief since 2011, and he has been with the department since 1992.

MARCH 15

A tragic incident in AdventHealth Sebring yesterday resulted in two deaths and caused the hospital to be locked down with emergency cases deferred to other medical facilities.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say it happened shortly before 11:30 yesterday morning when 66-year-old Joe Landon brought his special needs son in to the hospital for treatment. After he and the 23-year-old went into a mental health room, the son became combative.

At some point, Landon produced a handgun, and fired shots into a wall, causing a doctor and a security guard to flee. Landon then apparently shot his son, then himself. Both the Sebring men died at the scene. The incident remains under investigation.

It will be an up close and personal day today at the Sebring International Raceway, as fans will get a lot of action both on and off track. Not only will there be qualifying sessions for participants in this year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring presented by Cadillac, the teams will be holding an autograph session in the Alan Jay Paddock. The Whelen Mazda Mx-5 series, the Lamborghini Super Trofeo and the Porsche Carrera Cup North America all will hold races, as will the Alan Jay 120 Michelin Pilot Challenge. Even the classic cars in the Don Panoz Gallery of Legends will get another crack at the circuit in a parade lap.

This year's Mobil One 12 Hours of Sebring will kick off tomorrow morning at 9:40.

A pilot is credited with taking action to avoid tragedy after a plane crash in Polk County. Fire Rescue officials say an experimental aircraft crashed yesterday in Fort Meade. The plane caught fire, but two people inside got out and did not need to go to the hospital.

Authorities say the pilot's quick thinking allowed them to avoid serious injuries while also not endangering anyone on the ground.

There's no word on a cause. The FAA and NTSB have been notified.

A Hardee county man has been arrested on drug charges following a joint investigation by the Hardee and Polk county sheriff's offices, in cooperation with Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Authorities have charged 41-year-old Derail Kenyon Snell with numerous counts – including trafficking in fentanyl.

In the investigation, thousands of fentanyl pills, handguns and cash were recovered.

MARCH 19

There IS an election today, but early voting numbers indicate that it's not getting a ton of attention. Your voting precinct location is open for the Florida Presidential Preference Primary today, if you're a registered Republican and want your voice to be heard. Former President Trump IS the presumptive nominee, but there are a half dozen names still on the ballot. Sorry, Democrats – the state Democratic Party opted to endorse President Biden and not hold a primary this year. As of the end of the early voting period, roughly 7.9% of eligible voters had cast ballots by mail or early.

One polling location in today's election HAS changed ... Precinct 10, you normally vote at the Masonic Lodge, but this election, your polling location has changed to the Sebring Recreation Club on Pomegranate Avenue.

That search and rescue operation Sunday night on Lake Lotela ended in tragedy. Florida Fish and Wildlife crews, along with County Fire Rescue, Avon Park Fire and Highlands County Dive Team and the Polk County Sheriff's Office went searching for the occupant of an empty boat reported by a landowner along the lake. Preliminary information indicates 39 year old William M. Pyle was swimming near the vessel and did not resurface. Pyle was recovered from the water and pronounced deceased.

Despite a record turnout of fans and teams- it appears the Sebring International Raceway was the safest place to be in Highlands County last week. HCSO reported one Arrest – a DUI – and 10 EMS/Fire calls with 4 calls heading to a Medical Facility.

An Avon Park man was arrested on multiple felony drug charges Friday after an operation by the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Crime Suppression Unit. 29-year-old Quran Akiedo Thomas was being held on \$135,000 bond yesterday after a search warrant at his home on Wilhite Street in Avon Park yielded a half dozen drug-related charges. The CSU had previously made an undercover meth purchase from Thomas, which led to the search warrant.

MARCH 20

To nobody's great surprise, former President Donald Trump won Florida's Presidential Preference Primary yesterday. Trump collected 81.2% of the Republican votes cast statewide ... here in Highlands County, he won 88.1% of the ballots, to Nikki Haley's 8.1%. Turnout was light – only 15.7% of the County's 33,640 eligible Republican voters

cast ballots. There was no vote on the Democratic side – state Democrats decided to cancel any election and awarded all Florida’s delegates to President Biden.

Word is, Highlands County Schools have 156 deficiencies or maintenance needs left unresolved for at least three years. That from a State Auditor General’s report following annual inspections of the County’s school facilities. The deficiencies included safety issues like combustible materials storage, electrical rooms used as storage and partially obstructed corridors and exits. For the School District’s part, it pled a lack of staff in its response to the report.

26 pages of Impact Statements from the families of the 2024 Sun Trust shooting victims were selected and agreed to by Judge Angela Cowden and by defense and prosecution attorneys Friday in a Highlands County Circuit Court. Zephan Xaver’s penalty trial is set to begin May 20th. Defense attorney said most of the victims’ families intended to read the edited versions themselves.

Sebring’s City Council tonight will hear an appeal from the Sebring Chamber of Commerce looking to overturn a decision by the city’s Historic Preservation Commission denying the Chamber’s request to paint the outside façade of the Circle Theatre. Members of the Commission were concerned that painting the natural brick façade wouldn’t maintain the original, historic preservation of the building’s front view. No word what color the Chamber – or others who may be involved – have in mind.

MARCH 21`

The Highlands County Commission wants to know what it can do help bolster the County’s retail business – and what it can do to recruit new businesses. The Commission voted this week to accept a \$40,000 grant from Competitive Florida to study the topic. In other actions, the Board also approved a waiver for tipping fees at the County Landfill for the Highway Park Neighborhood’s Great American Cleanup event running through this Friday and recognized Natural Resources Manager Dawn Ritter receiving her designation as a Certified Lakes Manager from the North American Lake Management Society. She is only the 8th person in Florida to receive this certification..

Over in Hardee County, a Zolfo Springs man is in custody after a domestic battery call turned into a multi-gun fight in a Zolfo Springs back yard Tuesday. 29 year old Morgan Miguel Garcia reportedly was involved in a no-contact order violation including battery on a victim in the home – when officers arrived Garcia was found in the back yard, armed with an AR15 rifle. He allegedly shot at a deputy, who returned fire. Garcia fled

into the woods and was the subject of a multi-agency manhunt involving Hardee, Highlands, DeSoto and Polk County officers and K9's. A phoned-in tip yesterday afternoon finally led authorities to Garcia and he was arrested without incident. He's been charged with ten offenses including assault with a firearm on a law enforcement officer.

It was raining people in Lake Wales Monday afternoon. Around 3:00pm, Police responded to the downtown area after reports of skydivers landing off course. Three skydivers, parachuters made uncontrolled landings along Scenic Highway in town – one of the skydivers was able to land without incident, two others made hard landings, with non-life threatening injuries. The skydivers were among a group of 14 people practicing crew formations out of the Lake Wales Airport. A few other skydivers landed a little off course in nearby pastures, but there were no other injuries reported.

MARCH 22

The weekend after Race Week in Highlands County is often rather quiet. Not so this Saturday in Avon Park – the second annual "Springapalooza" Festival runs from 8am till 5pm along the Mile Long Mall, raising funds for Heartland Helping Hands ... the organization this year is earmarking funds to supporting Viet Nam Veteran Curt Ruggles, a resident at Royal Care in Avon Park. There's a 3k Mall Run, breakfast at Donaldson Park, vendors, food trucks, music and more till 5pm. They could use more entries for the bed races at the event – log onto heartlandhelpinghands.org.

Our local theatre troupe is bringing home some accolades on a regional level. Highlands Lakeside Theatre's Laura Wade won second place in the "Best Play" category at the ten-state Southeastern Regional Theatre Conference up in North Carolina this week. The play also won honors for Best Set, and Larry Moore won Best actor award.

If you saw smoke in the Spring Lake area yesterday, don't assume the worst – your neighbors didn't burn their pizza. There was a controlled burn near the corner of Highway 98 and Elliott Road. Planned, and no sausages, cheese or structures were endangered.

It wasn't an election, but a 20 year member of the Lake Placid Town Council is back. Debra Worley was defeated for re-election in April of '22, but was the only person who applied for an appointment to fill the unexpired term of Greg Sapp, who resigned his seat at the end of last year over the new requirements for far more detailed public disclosure of officials' finances. Worley took her seat at last week's Town Council meeting.

This IS an election, though, with some teeth in it. The annual online competition between the state's sheriff's' department K9's is on. This one's for the puppies, and Highlands County's K9 Hank garnered enough support in the preliminary rounds for a first-round "bye." Keep tabs on the rounds on the Sheriff's Department Facebook page and vote daily. Serious woofing – err, bragging rights are at stake.

MARCH 25

It will be double duty for the Avon Park city council tonight. At 5:00 they will sit as the city's Community Redevelopment Agency Board. Among other things, they will learn about the progress of municipal pickleball courts, the development of a splash pad at Donaldson Park, and the leasing of an office for CRA Coordinator Shawn Holiday at the Avon Park Chamber of Commerce.

At 6:00, the council will commence their regular meeting. They will hear from developer Emilio Garabaldi on his proposal to put a "parkette" in the space formerly occupied by the Wilde Building.

They also will discuss investigation findings reference a complaint filed against City Manager Mark Schrader, and will look at an evaluation form, to rate his first year on the job.

City Councilwoman Bernice Taylor also wants to discuss a request to produce public records. The city clerk has asked for the packet Taylor said she had received prior to the last council meeting. Taylor says she wants to know why, and for what the information will be used.

A hit and run accident reportedly has claimed the life of a Sebring man. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the 63-year-old cyclist was riding south on Ponce DeLeon Blvd. yesterday morning when he was hit from behind by a car. The cyclist was pronounced dead at the scene.

Troopers say the driver did not stop. However, they later found a suspect vehicle at a nearby condominium. Subsequently, 19-year-old Tavarrius D. Hilton was arrested and charged with leaving the scene of an accident with death.

He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

State Road 64 near the Hardee County line was closed for a time over the weekend due to smoke caused by a brush fire. Local firefighters with the help of the Florida Forestry Service, have been able to contain the flames, which started near Lone Bay Blvd, then jumped the road.

Forestry crews reportedly did some back burns and cut trenches to help contain the flames. Witness reports indicate as much as 60 acres may have been charred in the

incident.

No official cause has been listed, but citizen reports say it may have been a burn pile that got away. No injuries were reported, no buildings apparently were damaged.

Motorists be aware, the City of Sebring is implementing a local road closure on East Center Avenue from Circle Park Drive to Wall Street today and tomorrow afternoon. Today it will run 3:00pm to 6:00pm, while tomorrow it will be shut down from 1:00pm to 7:30pm.

Both closures will include parking restrictions as well as the area from Circle Park Drive to Wall Street being closed.

Drivers will need to take an alternate route.

MARCH 26

It was announced last night at the Avon Park city council meeting that a conflict of interest complaint has been filed against Mayor Garrett Anderson with the Florida Ethics Commission. Anderson said he had been notified that Steven Madre, of "Fitness 4 You" had filed the action, in connection with a complex purchase of the Brickell Building in downtown Avon Park.

Madre's attorney Mike Durham – a former legal counsel for the Highlands County Sheriff's office – urged the council to do their own investigation, and suggested that could result in the unwinding of the building's purchase.

Council took no action on the suggestion.

Reportedly, the ethics commission investigation could take as much as six months to complete.

After a year on the job, Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader will be getting an evaluation. Human Resources Director Denise Koger last night outlined four major areas of performance including relations with employees, council, other governmental agencies and managerial abilities.

It also calls for an overall score. Schrader will meet with individual members of the council over the next 30 days before the evaluations need to be turned in and tabulated. In other action, Koger issued a report exonerating Schrader in connection with an employee complaint.

One driver was killed and another seriously injured in an accident south of Lake Placid yesterday. Florida Highway Patrol reports show that a semi tractor trailer rig driven by an Okeechobee man, was eastbound on State Road 70 near old State Road 8, when the big rig went left of center and slammed into an oncoming sport utility vehicle.

The driver of the car, a 60-year-old Venus man was pronounced dead at the scene, the driver of the semi was listed in "serious" condition. The mishap remains under investigation.

A complaint has been filed against the Superintendent of The Lake Wales Charter School. Dr Wayne Rodolfich has been accused of creating "a toxic work environment" after he allegedly shouted at an unnamed employee and pounded on the table. Human Resources Director LaQuanda Burroughs said the incident was referred to as "demoralizing and embarrassing." She recommended an external employment law firm be hired to investigate.

Rodolfich said he welcomed the action, and said the complaint was the first time he had been made aware that anyone in the office had a problem with him. He noted no other such complaints had been filed against him, and said he had a deep concern about the origin of the allegations.

MARCH 27

It's going to be a while longer for developer Emilio Garabaldi. He's pushing Avon Park city council members to put in a "parkette" where the Wilde Building once stood. Council agreed to let the current request for proposal – which calls for the construction of a new building at the Main Street site – to run its course into June, before they consider anything else.

Some council members want to see space for more business and housing in the area. Garabaldi contends that his proposed pocket park, with a pergola, picnic tables and other amenities, would spur more foot traffic in the City of Charm.

The idea of tournament ready pickleball courts in Avon Park has taken another step forward. The Avon Park Community Redevelopment Agency board instructed staff to look at what it would take to put in eight such courts at Donaldson Park, where the tennis courts now sit.

In addition to CRA money, CRA Director Shawn Holiday revealed that there also have been offers of private donations to make the conversion. The board also asked staff to investigate the availability of grants to make such a project happen.

Developer Robert Blackmon says the reclamation project on Harder Hall is on schedule, although the methodical restoration project is not nearly as fast as some people would like. Crews still are in the process of refurbishing the roof and walls to stop water intrusion. The next phase will be the windows – before crews can move inside and begin work there.

Blackmon last night addressed the Highlands Tea Party, assuring the group that the facility will remain pink, and outlining ultimate plans for restaurants, a pool and even a marina on Little Lake Jackson.

Work has commenced on the new \$2 million dollar Highlands County Traffic Operation Center. Crews from E.O. Koch have started pouring a slab at the site, located next to the Penny Ogg Elections Center on Kenilworth Blvd near the Military Sea Services Museum. The project has been in the works for the past 18 years. County officials say it should be completed by December.

MARCH 28

Avon Park city council members have said "thanks but no thanks" to a Duke Energy proposal to install a couple of chargers for electric vehicles in The City of Charm. Both Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader and city attorney Gerald Buhr referred to the offer as a "one-sided agreement," noting it already had been turned down by South Florida State College and the Jacaranda Hotel.

Reportedly, there already are a couple of Avon Park businesses who plan to install charging stations at their locations.

Avon Park Community Redevelopment Director Shawn Holiday now has a place to call home. City council, sitting as the CRA Board, moved to allow Holiday to establish an office in the Avon Park Shuffleboard Club – across the street from city hall. Several other locations had been suggested – but Holiday said the shuffleboard location would be the most convenient.

Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader noted that staff quickly is outgrowing city hall, with every square foot of the building – other than the basement – already in use.

A Polk County man wanted for a deadly hit-and-run in Bartow, now is behind bars in Hillsborough County. Lakeland's Edgardo Rosado was arrested yesterday in Brandon. Florida Highway Patrol Troopers say Rosado apparently was speeding away from a minor crash in Bartow yesterday morning when he hit and killed an 18-year-old walking to school.

Rosado allegedly fled the scene of that crash, left his car at his house, got into another car and drove to Brandon. Deputies say they found that car outside the Brandon Mall, and Rosado was found inside the mall and arrested.

Commercial passenger flights are coming back to Polk County. Avelo [[uh-VEL-oh]] Airlines announced yesterday it'll start flying in and out of Lakeland Linder International

Airport.

Flights to New Haven, Connecticut will commence in June.

The flights will run twice a week, on Thursdays and Sundays.

Avelo is the first airline to serve Lakeland in over a decade. Lakeland Mayor Bill Mutz says the city welcomes an exciting new era of travel, and this service opens up a world of increasing possibilities.