

## Highlands County News

October 2

A Highlands County resident reportedly was killed yesterday in a Hardee County traffic crash. According to reports, a Sebring man failed to negotiate a curve on Parnell Road. The car ran off the highway, down an embankment and slammed into the concrete culvert.

Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate he was not wearing a seatbelt and was ejected from the vehicle. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

There was a multi-car pile-up south of Sebring this morning. It occurred shortly before 6 AM near the intersection of State Road 66 and Sparta Road.

Witnesses say it appears that there were four vehicles involved in the snarl. No other details have yet been released.

A traffic stop on Highway 27 netted a drug arrest for Highlands County Sheriff's deputies. Traverrian Nikael Bernard Williams was pulled over near the intersection of Lake Josephine Drive.

During the stop, a Sheriff's K9 alerted to the presence of drugs in the car, inside the vehicle deputies found fentanyl, MDMA and cocaine. Lawmen also seized a Glock 9mm pistol.

Williams was charged with drug and firearms counts and booked into the Highlands County jail.

The official start of a new VA Clinic in Sebring began this morning with groundbreaking ceremonies. The new facility is slated to go in on New Life Way.

Highway 17 at REA Road in Hardee County was closed for a time last night due to a pedestrian involved traffic crash.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials have not released details on what happened or the condition of the pedestrian.

A man is getting psychiatric help after an incident in Polk County. The sheriff's office says a man in a mental health crisis climbed a railroad lighting structure in Lakeland yesterday morning. He remained there, 30 feet above South Combee Road, for about ten hours.

Fire Rescue safely removed him from the structure using two tower rescue trucks.

Deputies say the 28-year-old was taken to the hospital for evaluation. He's also facing charges that include drug possession.

A Miami man is in custody after a high-speed chase in Polk County. The chase started Saturday night on I-4 near SR 33.

FHP says a state trooper saw David Bush driving an SUV aggressively, and when the trooper ran the SUV's tag, he found it was reported stolen.

The trooper tried to pull Bush over, but Bush shut off the SUV's lights and refused to stop. That led to a chase that reached 105 miles an hour before a PIT maneuver was used at Rockridge Road and US 98 to get Bush to stop.

Bush and his passenger then ran away on foot, but Bush was later found at a gas station and arrested.

October 3

Some residents have been complaining about a haze or smoke in Highlands County. Officials from the Florida Forest Service say drift smoke from Canadian wildfires is covering most of the state. So far, there's no indication how long it will be here, despite good numbers from the Smoke Dispersion Index. The effects of the cloud reach as far north as Jacksonville and as far south as Miami and Collier County. Current numbers show the air quality here as "unhealthy for sensitive groups." Older adults, children and those with heart or lung conditions are urged to stay in air conditioning and avoid the outside until conditions improve.

The Highlands County Legislation Delegation will make a stop here tomorrow. State Senator Erin Grall and Florida House Representative Kaylee Tuck will be at the Highlands County Commissioners Chambers starting at 9:30.

On tap will be updates on some of the pending legislation that will have local effects in the upcoming session.

A number of individuals and groups have signed up to address the state legislators on a number of issues.

Highlands County commissioners this morning voted to give new County Administrator Laurie Hurner a four-percent pay raise, coupled with a pending one-percent increase slated for all county employees, Hurner's increase will jump a full five percent.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials have made an arrest in connection with a September 15 fatal shooting in Avon Park. 28-year-old Trevor Jaime Manning has been charged with second degree murder in connection with the incident.

The body of 21-year-old Michael Hilton was found behind a home on "A" Avenue by a resident after daylight. Reportedly the resident had heard gunshots in the area during the early morning hours. Apparently, Manning already was in jail, when evidence in the shooting led detectives to him.

Construction of a new VA clinic in Highlands County got a ceremonial start yesterday, as local officials turned the first shovels-full of earth in groundbreaking ceremonies. When completed, the new 14,000 square foot facility will service as many as 5,000 veterans each year.

The clinic, to be set off New Life Way in Sebring, will feature mental health services, social workers, pharmacists and tele-health facilities.

It's expected to be operational in the spring of 2025.

A Highlands County resident reportedly was killed Sunday in a Hardee County traffic crash. According to reports, a Sebring man failed to negotiate a curve on Parnell Road. The car ran off the highway, down an embankment and slammed into a concrete culvert.

Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate he was not wearing a seatbelt and was ejected from the vehicle. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Highlands County commissioners will consider whether or not to give a merit raise to Highlands County Administrator Laurie Hurner when they meet in regular session this morning.

In other action, commissioners will be asked whether or not they want to add another paid holiday – to coincide with the 10th Judicial Circuit Court calendar, and will hear a proclamation for National 4-H Week in the county.

October 4

That cloud of smoke from the Canadian Wildfires that covered most of Florida yesterday has moved on. At one point, the air quality index locally had ballooned to a reading of 130, which was deemed "unhealthy for sensitive groups." Older adults, young children and those with respiratory issues were urged to stay inside.

The number has dropped back down to 50 – which qualifies as "good."

The Highlands County Legislative Delegation will make a stop here this morning. State Senator Erin Grall and Florida House Representative Kaylee Tuck will be at the Highlands County Commissioners Chambers beginning at 9:30.

On tap will be updates on some of the pending legislation that will have local effects in the upcoming session.

A number of individuals and groups have signed up to address the state legislators on a number of their issues of interest.

Highlands County commissioners yesterday voted to give new County Administrator Laurie Hurner a four-percent pay raise, coupled with a pending one-percent increase slated for all county employees, Hurner's increase will jump a full five percent.

In other action, by a 3-2 vote, commissioners voted not to take an extra day off next year.

Independence Day is on a Thursday, and some other governmental entities will take the following Friday as well. County employees will work that day before the weekend.

October 5

When it comes to innovation, Highlands County might not be the spot. A new report from SmartDollar shows that the Sebring metro area didn't make the top 100 in the survey. In fact, the area came in at 120 in the so-called composite innovation index. Locally we had a score of 58.8, with only 1.3-percent of the workforce in what were termed innovative jobs.

Innovative jobs are said to be those in science, technology, engineering and math. Cities that topped the list included Austin, Denver and Boston.

Traffic in downtown Sebring may be interrupted for a time this morning, as the Sebring High School Blue Streaks hold their annual Homecoming Parade.

The procession will begin at 9:30 at Sebring High, head up South Commerce then over to Pine Street to the Sebring Middle School. They'll use the bus loop there to swing around and head back to the High School using the same path.

The parade is expected to take about an hour to complete.

If kids want their teachers to call them by a name other than the legal name that appears on their birth certificate, they'll need a note from their parents. Highlands school officials say that comes from a state directive and parents have been notified.

So if a student would rather have teachers refer to them as "Chuck" instead of "Charles," or "Skip" instead of "Richard," they will need to have their parents file the paperwork with the school.

Apparently, the rule does not apply to classmates.

There's a boil water notice in effect in Frostproof. Apparently, there was a water main break in the Friendly City yesterday. Officials say any water that would be used for consumption – including drinking,

ice cubes, washing food or brushing teeth – should first be boiled to kill off any harmful bacteria. So far there's no indication as to how long the notice will be in effect.

#### October 6

There's been a reported celebrity sighting in Highlands County. Usually its famous race car drivers, this time, social media posts say movie star Harrison Ford was in Sebring at a local diner. Apparently, the Oscar winner was in town to practice at Lockwood Aviation's multi-engine seaplane training program.

The fall infestation of Love Bugs has come and gone, but this year, there were virtually none of the flying insects that have been so annoying in the past. University of Florida professor Dr. Norman Leppla says it's no surprise – their population has been declining for years. He said the Love Bugs are subject to temperature and humidity – so they're vulnerable to drying out or to drowning. Moreover, they're not the only declining bug population. Bees, Lightning Bugs and other pollinators also have also decreased. So far, there's no clear indicator for the reason.

#### October 10

Highlands County sheriff's officials are investigating an early morning traffic accident. Reportedly, a woman was hit by a car around 5:00 this morning on Waterside Drive, in the Highlands Ridge Community.

Deputies say they're not sure what she was doing out so early in the morning. But she has been airlifted to a trauma center. The incident remains under investigation.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials say they have added a new member to their law enforcement team. They have introduced K-9 Mingo. He's an 18-month-old, yellow Labrador. Mingo reportedly has been trained to smell "all the illegal things and now has been deployed for his first shifts.

#### October 11

Officials at the Avon Park Air Force Range say they'll be hosting exercises today out at the bombing range. Those with their eyes to the skies can expect to see a bit more air traffic. Noise levels are not expected to be high,

The Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission will be in Highlands County today for a public hearing on their plans for the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife & Environmental area. The session on the 10-year plan will be held this evening at 7pm in the H.L. Bishop Park Clubhouse. The conservation tract encompasses more than 17,000 acres in Highlands and Polk counties. It represents the largest area of scrub habitat in the world.

Lakeland is joining the list of cities holding rallies in support of Israel. Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd is slated to speak at today's "Stand with Israel Rally." It'll be held at Temple Emanuel in Lakeland

beginning at 5:30.

Other rallies have been held in Tampa, Hallendale, Miami and Palm Beach.

Six men are facing charges after a child solicitation sting in Polk County. The sheriff's office announced the arrests yesterday as part of Operation Child Protector Four. For seven days, law enforcement officers from seven departments went on social media, apps and dating sites pretending to be children or guardians of children. The suspects were invited to meet a child at an undercover location, and when they arrived, they were arrested. Three of the six suspects are charged with human trafficking. The suspects range in age from 26 to 49. Three are from Orange County, two are from Polk County and one is from Osceola County. One is a daycare worker.

Some of Polk County's most popular residents are getting a health checkup. The city of Lakeland conducted its 43rd annual Swan Roundup yesterday on Lake Morton. Swans were gathered up in nets so they could be evaluated by doctors at My Pet's Animal Hospital. The exams will start this morning at 8:00. The original swans on Lake Morton date back to 1957 when they were donated to the city by Queen Elizabeth, the Second. A city official calls the swans a community icon.

October 12

There was a bit of a sticky situation south of Sebring. A single vehicle rollover accident caused a molasses spill at the intersection of Highway 27 and State Road 66.

Authorities had to close part of SR 66 to facilitate the cleanup. Apparently, there were no serious injuries.

Local officials are warning residents to keep their eyes to the skies today. This time it's not for airplanes, they warn that some very strong thunderstorms could be moving through the area later this afternoon. A low pressure system moving through the gulf could spawn some high winds, rain and even a tornado. They say low lying areas also might get some flooding.

When it comes to analytical jobs, a new survey says one in five people in Highlands County have that kind of employment. The analysis by the Critical Thinking Index shows that about 21-percent of the workers in the Sebring metro area have jobs in the fields of technology, artificial intelligence or digital technology.

That's below the national average of one in three workers – or about 33-percent of the job force in the analytical job sector.

A Polk County rabbi is finding something good in a time of tragedy. Temple Emanuel held a vigil for Israel yesterday in Lakeland. About 200 people showed up, and Rabbi David Goldstein says he felt reassured by the turnout. He tells ABC Action News it shows compassion, conscience and love still exist.

October 17

Highlands County commissioners will get together in regular session this morning. They'll be getting an update from the county's Economic Development Department.

They'll brief commissioners on their efforts to bring grants, new jobs and business here. Reportedly, they

currently are working on 15 projects.

Commissioners also will consider a controversial request to change an 18-acre parcel of land off Sparta Road from low to medium density. Residents showed up at the Planning & Zoning meeting to object to the idea, citing concerns about drainage, increased traffic and noise issues.

## October 18

Highlands County School Board members were slated to review a couple dozen new state policies when they met in regular session last night. But they ended up tabling about half of them, due to language objected to by some of the board members.

The verbiage indicates board members cannot consider the social, political or developmental stances of vendors when making their selections for a job.

Board members Reece Martin and Nicole Radonski called on State Representative Kaylee Tuck and State Senator Erin Grall to clarify what the board could, and could not do.

They'll take the issue up again at their next meeting.

Describing it as "a cleanup item," Highlands County commissioners yesterday dissolved the municipal services benefit units in regards to volunteer fire departments in the county.

Commissioners emphasized that the move would not do away with volunteers or their respective departments. They noted that the county currently is getting funding from the annual fire assessment, which was hiked again this year.

Hardee County Sheriff's deputies reportedly have diffused a potential conflict between a couple of local school students. They're conducting an investigation in regards to a threat of a shooting between two middle school students at a bus stop.

They say details still are unfolding. However, one juvenile was taken into custody in connection with the incident.

Hardee County Sheriff Vent Crawford says at this time there is no reason to believe students will be at risk of any danger when attending school today.

A Seminole County man has been identified as the person killed in an apparent Polk County road rage shooting.

Polk sheriff's officials say Altamonte Springs' Kevin Berry died yesterday after being taken off life support.

The 58-year-old was shot Sunday morning in Davenport on the I-4 ramp to US Highway 27. Deputies believe he was shot by another driver, but no arrest has been announced.

There will be a familiar face leading the Florida Senate this year. State Senator Ben Albritton of Wauchula – whose district once included Highlands County – officially was selected among the Republican caucus to be the president-designate for the 2024-2026 Legislative Term during a ceremony yesterday.

Albritton said he was "humbled" by the selection. The senate president leads the Florida Senate as the chamber approves legislation.

There's been a traffic accident on Highway 27 South near the Watering Hole restaurant. No indication on injuries, how badly traffic has been impacted or other details.

October 19

Some local residents are showing their support for Israel today. The Highlands Tea Party will host a flag wave in front of the Fairmount Cinema Square this afternoon at 5:00.

Organizers are asking those interested in participating to bring their flags, and positive signs of support. The event is expected to run about 90 minutes.

Lake Wales reportedly wants to become "A City in a Garden. To that end, they have hired certified horticulturist Kevin Polk as the new landscape designer and arborist for the City's parks & recreation department.

Polk will oversee the current plans to revive the landscapes in the city's historic core – paying homage to the town's original 1930s landscape architects, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Olmsted Brothers, who were commissioned by Edward Bok to do the work at The Singing Tower.

It's part of the "'Lake Wales Connected" plan, a community-based vision to revitalize the downtown area and northwest neighborhood.

Officials in Lakeland are trying to reassure residents who are worried the city's swans will be bothered by the annual Christmas parade.

The city announced plans to change the parade route this year due to construction on Orange Street.

The parade is now set to go around Lake Morton, but a local petition wants the city to avoid the area to protect the lake's swans.

The woman who started the petition two weeks ago claims the parade will disturb the swans' nesting sites, cause noise pollution and lead to trash accumulating in the lake.

Over 500 people have signed the petition. A city spokesperson, though, says cleanup crews will take action as soon as the parade ends. He says the crews will hit the Lake Morton area immediately after the parade passes by.

October 20

The Sebring Historical Society will stage their inaugural "Pioneer Daze" event tomorrow at the Highlands County Fairgrounds. Based inside the Alan Jay Arena, there will be kids' events such as a fossil dig, clothes washing on an old washboard and the chance to use an old timey pump to get water.

For the rest of the family, there will be a variety of vendors, food trucks and other activities. That event will run from 10am until 4pm tomorrow. There also will be a live radio remote on Lite 105.7 FM.

A mobile home at Sun 'N Lakes South was totally destroyed by fire yesterday. Units from Sun 'N Lakes South, Placid Lakes, Highlands Park and Lake Placid responded, but were unable to save the Highlands Boulevard residence.

No injuries were reported, cause of the fire remains under investigation.

Veteran's Day is this coming November 11, but Highlands County Commissioner Don Elwell says he thinks they need more than just a day. Elwell has suggested that the county proclaim November as "Veteran's Month."

He has suggested that citizens who have ideas to salute veteran's throughout the month contact the county – that would include both observances and commercial considerations, such as veterans' discounts on goods and services.



A former jail is getting new life in Polk County just in time for Halloween.

The sheriff's office has turned the old Polk County Jail in Bartow into a haunted house. The facility closed in 2000 after almost 40 years, and at least one deputy swears it's really haunted. She tells Fox 13 News there were a lot of deaths in the jail, and it has a grim history.

The haunted house opens tonight from 6:30 to 10:30. Tickets range from five dollars to 15 dollars, and proceeds go to the United Way of Central Florida.

## October 23

Firefighters from various stations were joined by Florida Forest Service crews over the weekend to help put down a couple of brush fires. Both of the blazes were located off Hammock Road.

The first began Saturday night and was put down, then there was another one last night. Forest Service units are on scene in case there is a re-kindle.

No structures were threatened and no injuries reported.

An auto accident reportedly sparked a fire Saturday night in Orange Blossom Estates. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate a Sebring man was southbound on Orange Blossom Boulevard when he lost control of his car while rounding a curve.

The vehicle slammed into a house, then caught fire – resulting in the home also catching fire. The driver reportedly was flown out to a trauma center.

Troopers say the incident remains under investigation.

Avon Park city council members will gather tonight in regular session, and again scheduled are a fistful of special event requests.

Among them are street closings for the LC5 Foundation 5-K run, the annual MLK Day parade, Union Church's Fall Festival and the Fall for Jesus Festival staged by the Florida Avenue Baptist Church.

Council members also will hear about plans for the Fusion Fest in the City of Charm.

If you're looking for Samaritan's Touch Care Center, starting today, they'll be in a new location. The health care center has moved to Hope Circle. The faith-based charitable operation provides for a wide variety of social needs, including family medicine, and dental care.

Officials say both hurricanes Irma and Ian took their toll on the former building, and it was more cost-effective to re-locate.

There were some tense moments south of Lake Wales this weekend, when Polk County Sheriff's deputies tried to serve a warrant. The people in the house on Candlelight Loop reportedly refused to come out – after the initial contact.

Deputies and Lake Wales Police evacuated houses in the surrounding area during the standoff. In the end, two people were taken into custody without further incident.

Authorities say more details are set to be released.

A Polk County man is charged with murder in Hillsborough County.

Winter Haven's Shannon Owens was arrested Saturday night after a shooting. The victim has not been identified.

The 31-year-old Owens is charged with second-degree murder and felon in possession of a firearm.

There's no word on what led to the shooting.



October 24

Residents in Avon Park may be looking at a new assessment. City council members last night learned about new state regulations about storm water runoff and how municipalities will have to take care of the problem.

To help pay for a master study and remediation efforts, city officials are looking at the possibility of establishing an assessment on residents and businesses in the city of charm.

Council members voted to start advertising the plan, and will discuss it with consultants and engineers at their December 11th meeting.

After what Florida Highway Patrol officials are calling "an exhaustive criminal investigation," troopers have arrested Alexis Zamora.

The 27-year-old Arcadia man faces counts of DUI Manslaughter in connection with a June 28 single vehicle crash on State Road 70 near Robert McGee Road

A passenger in the vehicle, identified only as a 27-year old Arcadia man, was killed in the accident.

Zamora was seriously hurt when his SUV went off the road and slammed into a concrete utility pole.

A man accused of killing a pastor's son in Winter Haven now is in custody. Polk County sheriff's officials announced Taquion "Quan" Cotton has been arrested for the murder of Roderick Wilson.

The 20-year-old Wilson was found shot to death Sunday in the parking lot of the Pentecostal Church of God on 34th Street, Northwest.

The 22-year-old Cotton lives near the church. He's facing charges that include first-degree murder.

Sheriff Grady Judd says there's no apparent connection between Cotton and Wilson, and there's no word on what may have led to the shooting.

A Winter Haven man reportedly has been arrested after being was caught in the middle of moving a murder victim's body.

The Hillsborough County Sheriff's deputies report deputies were called to Deeson Road in Lakeland Saturday for a shooting.

According to detectives, the victim went to a location on Deeson Road and met with suspect Shannon Owens, 31, of Winter Haven.

Multiple witnesses told lawmen that they'd seen Owens trying to "remove" the victim's body — which had an upper body gunshot wound.

Detectives said the witnesses detained Owens until first responders got to the scene.

Owens faces charges of second-degree murder, felon in possession of a firearm, and several out-of-county warrants.

Hillsborough deputies have authority in that portion of the city.

October 26

Highlands County sheriff's deputies say there may be some counterfeit currency circulating in the area. A woman reportedly passed some funny money earlier this week at the Dollar General Store on Lundsford Road in Sebring.

Detectives now are trying to find her to find out where she got it. Her photo is posted on the Highlands County Sheriff's Office Facebook page.

Officials of the Lake Wales police say there are some scam artists working in and around the Crown Jewel of the Ridge. They're known as the "Romanian Travelers." In recent incidents they have posed as people who want to sell or trade jewelry – but steal it instead.

Most in the instances reportedly occur at local gas stations. In one case they are said to have been in a

Jaguar – in other instances they were in a BMW. Anyone who has any such interaction is asked to call the Lake Wales Police.

There's concern in Polk County after a liner at a Phosphogypsum stack facility may have torn. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection says a possible liner tear may have happened last week at the Mosaic New Wales facility in Mulberry. Work is underway to confirm if there was a tear. The facility contains radioactive phosphate waste. If there is a tear, then process water could have been released. Mosaic, though, says even if there is a tear, the well system should prevent groundwater outside the facility from being affected.

October 27

Got some old meds around the house? They may look like small potatoes but it's NOT good for the environment to just flush or wash 'em down the drain. Local police and sheriff's departments are participating in National Drug Take Back Day tomorrow. Old prescription meds can be dropped off at the Lake Placid Police Department, a special Sebring Police collection point at Highlands Regional, or at both Sheriff Department locations downtown on Eucalyptus Street or in Avon Park. No questions asked – collection hours are from 10-2.

Speaking of Hazardous junk, there's also a County Hazardous waste collection event on Skipper Road south of Sebring. Paints, varnishes and other chemicals, as well as old electronic gear are being taken in. Follow the signs off 27 onto Skipper Road south of Sebring.

Looks like a few fewer of us are working lately – Career Source Heartland released the unemployment figures for the area this week and says the four-county unemployment rate edged up to 4.2% in September. The region includes Highlands, Hardee, Okeechobee and Glades County. That 4.2% number is up from last September's 3.6% rate and a bit above the state's 3.0% unemployment. Okeechobee County's the hot spot in the area for jobs, reporting 3.5% unemployment, and Highlands the hardest-hit in the region, where we came in with a 4.7% jobless rate.

Halloween weekend begins in earnest tonight with a couple events in Downtown Sebring – Sebring's Downtown Fall-o-Ween Trick or Treat event is this evening – munchies, fun and games for the little ones, and the Pumpkin Prince and Princess contests, on the Circle. And the Chamber of Commerce has haunted up the Circle Theatre with a Haunted Maze tonight, tomorrow and again on Tuesday evenings. Official Trick or Treating, by the way, is set for Saturday night in Sebring and Avon Park. Lake Placid urges their goblins to head for the Lake Placid Halloween Block Party downtown of Tuesday Night for treats and events there on the Day itself.

Avon Park's latest car dealership opens its new facility this afternoon. Huston Chevrolet has a new showroom and dealership location on Highway 27 just south of Avon Park. The official ribbon cutting is this evening with prizes, music, catered food and tours of the new facility. The dealership's sister facility, Huston Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep and RAM, has a Car Show and Trunk or Treat celebration tomorrow beginning at 10am.

Last week the Sebring Historical Society had their inaugural Pioneer Daze. A similar event is being staged in Lake Wales. The event is in Lake Wales Park tomorrow and Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. It's a FREE, 2-day heritage celebration for the whole family.

## October 30

It appears to have been a safe and sane Halloween weekend, there were many trunk-or-treat events, a couple of scary Halloween Mazes and the traditional Beggars night. All apparently went off without incident. Law enforcement had no traffic accidents, structure fires, significant disputes or other such incidents to report.

But Halloween's not over yet. The Lake Placid Halloween Block Party will be held tomorrow evening on the traditional October 31 Halloween date. There also will be a trunk-or-treat tomorrow evening in Highway Park.

Area law enforcement officials are warning people to be aware that scammers again are working the phones. In fact, they say, it never seems to stop.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say someone is calling people claiming to be one of their sergeants and saying people need to call about an "urgent" matter.

This is not true and you can ignore the call if you get one.

Lake Wales police say they are dealing with a similar scam, aimed at local businesses. In this one, they pressure employees to get money from the register or safe, to send to the caller to correct a so-called problem.

In all those instances, the money heads overseas and disappears.

A Polk County man is accused of pointing a gun at a state trooper. Auburndale's Matthew Reiter was arrested yesterday. FHP says the 32-year-old was driving on SR 570 when he became agitated that traffic was moving slowly.

At one point, he allegedly pulled a gun and pointed it at a driver in another car.

The other driver turned out to be an off-duty FHP trooper in his personal car with his family. Reiter was later arrested at his home. He's facing charges that include aggravated assault with a weapon.

## October 31

Lake Placid High, Lake Placid Middle, and Lake Placid Elementary were locked down for a time this morning. Highlands County School officials say it was "a precautionary measure," as the result of a student reporting that another student had made a threat.

All three schools were locked down due to the proximity of the campuses. Highlands County Sheriff's officials were called in to investigate, but found there was no issue for students or teachers.

Time's wastin' for residents in the City of Charm to let local officials know what they would like to see in Avon Park. A community survey has been posted at the top of the Avon Park municipal web page, to allow citizens to make their voices heard.

The survey asks what kinds of amenities, businesses and events they'd like to see. Amenities range from more trees to an amphitheater. Business choices include health food stores, night clubs, and recreational facilities. Events options listed are festivals, fairs, concerts and movies – among other things.

In all, there are more than 70 choices on the survey.

One Lake Placid man was killed and another seriously injured in a Desoto County County traffic accident. Florida Highway Patrol reports indicate the driver was eastbound on State Road 70 when he lost control of his car.

The vehicle went off the road and overturned. Neither of the men were wearing their seatbelts, and were

ejected from the rolling vehicle.

Troopers say they still are trying to find out how the accident occurred.

An investigation into an Avon Park burglary reportedly led Highlands County Sheriff's deputies to a cache of weapons. Long guns, handguns and a crossbow were taken in the incident.

Resident told investigators they'd seen a black Toyota pickup in the yard, a vehicle the homeowner apparently knew. Lawmen later found the truck at a Lake Sebring home.

After conducting a traffic stop on Kenneth James McLucas, authorities located all but one of the weapons.

The Sebring man has been charged with counts of burglary, grand theft, among other things.

He was booked into the Highlands County jail.

Today is All Hallows Eve – or Halloween as is more commonly known. While some communities had their observances last weekend, the Town of Lake Placid has opted to stick with the traditional date.

The Lake Placid Halloween Block Party will go on from 6-9 this evening on Interlake Boulevard, in addition to candy – there will be costume and pumpkin decorating contests.

In Highway Park will host their third annual Trunk or Treat – that'll be on Crestmore Street. They also will have contests and prizes.

The Highlands Baptist Church in Lake Placid will host a family fun night tonight with bounce houses games and other activities

## November 2

The Avon Park Fire Department has hit the century mark. They will be celebrating their 100th birthday tomorrow from 4-6pm. The Avon Park Fire Department's Centennial Celebration will include activities for citizens of all ages including games, goodies, food, and an historical display. There even will be some retired firefighters in attendance. Current firefighters also will answer questions as well as displaying and demonstrating equipment.

The event will be at the Avon Park Fire Station on South Delaney Avenue.

A new report by Construction Coverage shows that when it comes to home improvement, the Sebring area trails behind the national average. The survey reveals that there were 5.1 home improvement loans per each 1,000 residents here. The average amount for remodeling? About \$55,000.

Nationally, homeowners took out an average of 8.8 home improvement loans per 1,000 residents at a median amount of \$75,000.

Pollsters say the numbers come from the US Census Bureau and Zillow.

The Hardee County Sheriff's Office has announced that they terminated Deputy Nicholas Zotto.

The action came after a series of videos came to their attention depicting concerning behavior from Deputy Zotto while off duty. They apparently involved the treatment of animals in his care as owner of Pawsome Sitters, in Manatee County.

The nature of the videos was not revealed.

The 29-year-old Zotto had served with the Hardee County Sheriff's office since April 2022. Officials say the action was immediate.

The Hardee Chamber of Commerce now is taking nominations for the Grand Marshall for this year's Christmas Parade. Chamber officials say they are looking for someone who has made, or is making a significant contribution to the community.

Nominations will close on Monday November 6th and the Hardee Christmas Parade will be December 2nd in Wauchula

November 3

Fire crews from Highlands County were out knocking down another brush fire last night – this one was around 5 acres' worth on Queen Avenue, south of Sebring. Crews from Highlands County and the Forest service were on the scene between 5 and 6pm, and say the fires contained, but may still be smoking.

This weekend features one of Sebring's annual "biggies" on the Circle in Downtown Sebring. The Highlands Arts League's 56th Annual Arts and Crafts Festival happens tomorrow on and around Circle Park. The Art League says they expect over 40 arts and crafts vendors to view and buy from, along with food vendors, activities for kids, face painting, and Sebring High's Emerging Artists competition. And live music by "Outta Hand Band". 10 till 4, on the Circle tomorrow.

Later in the evening, Circle of Truth Ministries has a free concert in the parking lot of the old Wachovia Bank Building off North Ridgewood in downtown Sebring. That takes place at 7pm.

If you're heading through downtown Sebring, by the way, that Festival DOES mean road closures. Traffic trying to follow State Road 17 – which includes the Circle – will follow a detour off North and South Ridgewood to Park Street, then back to the other side of Ridgewood.

The Avon Park Fire Department is celebrating its hundredth birthday today. There's an open house at the fire station on South Delaney Avenue from 4 till 6pm today – games, goodies to eat and a historical display. Current and retired firefighters will be there to answer questions and show off the fire station and equipment.

It's been a rough earnings season for the stock market, but one of our area's major companies is feeling no pain – in Publix Super Markets' latest earnings report this week, the Lakeland-based regional grocery chain said its net sales increased 111.4% in the third quarter compared with a year ago.

And, don't forget, this is the weekend we "fall back" to Standard Time. Florida's Senators and Congress people have tried to get us removed from the annual pain, but so far they haven't gotten support for permanent Daylight Savings time down here. Sooo, its back up an hour Sunday morning and get that extra hour of sleep. You do have to admit, it's easier that losing an hour of sleep will be next spring ...

November 6

Firefighters in Highlands County were busy over the weekend. Units from Sun 'N Lakes South, Placid Lakes, and Highlands Park worked with Florida Forest Service Crews to contain a brush fire off Claverton Drive and Brevard Avenue in Lake Placid.

The fire threatened no structures and has been allowed to burn itself out within the confines of fire break lines. There were no injuries reported and so far, no cause for the fire has been released.

The Sebring Blue Streak win Friday night over the Fort Pierce Cobras was more than another step toward the State Championship playoffs, it broke a record that had stood for more than half a century.

Lavaar Scott now is the winningest coach in Sebring Blue Streak football history. His 85th win cements the record over coach Glen Odlham who set the record back in 1967 – both reached the accomplishment in 13 seasons.

Playoffs will commence this Friday at Firemen's Field when Sebring takes on the Westwood Panthers.

A Wauchula resident has died in a Hardee County traffic crash. Florida Highway Patrol reports say the 48-year-old man was northbound on US 17 near Keeton Road, when he ran into the rear of a semi-tractor trailer rig.

He was pronounced dead at the scene. Troopers say the mishap still is under investigation.

The Crown Jewel of the Ridge is getting the business. Advanced Drainage Systems, Inc. has officially confirmed that it will build a new, state-of-the-art pipe manufacturing facility in Lake Wales.

Company officials say they plan to break ground "sometime next year" on a 100-acre site with frontage off Hunt Brothers Road.

When completed, the plant will manufacture corrugated plastic pipe, adding to the company's currently existing manufacturing presence in Florida.

November 7

State Road 66 south of Sebring was closed for a time last night following a grinding two vehicle crash at the intersection of '66 and County Road 635. Early reports indicate a car and a pickup collided there about 6:30.

At least three people are said to have been flown to trauma centers with injuries from the crash.

Florida Highway Patrol troopers have released no names or other details on the accident.

It will be a busy day for Highlands County commissioners today. At their regular meeting this morning, they'll again take up the contentious issue of a proposed housing development off Sparta Road.

Neighbors are unhappy about the project, pointing to noise and the potential impact it will have on an already busy road.

In other action, the commission will look at designating November as Veterans' Month in Highlands County and a proclamation recognizing the 10-year anniversary of Highlands as a Purple Heart County.

At 1:30 this afternoon, Commissioners will hold a special workshop to discuss the influx of requests to put up mobile home parks – and how that fits with the way commissioners and citizens would like to see Highlands County Develop.

Three decades ago, a former commission eliminated nearly a quarter million platted mobile home lots, in an effort to change the way housing might develop here.

Highlands County Sheriff's detectives are looking for a couple of people who burglarized the press box at the Durrah Martin Baseball Complex in Avon Park.

The two were caught on camera – they appear to be young, white males. Authorities believe at least one of the suspects cut themselves climbing through the window they broke to gain entry.

Within the past few months, there have been multiple burglaries at the complex. Pictures of the two may



be seen on the Highlands County Sheriff's office Facebook page.  
Anyone with information is asked to call the Highlands County Sheriff's office.

November 8

Highlands County commissioners yesterday turned back a proposed development on Sparta Road, but it took them better than five hours to do it. The contentious zoning hearing had experts for the land developers presenting their case for 80 units on 20 acres near the intersection of Sparta and Highway 27. Neighbors opposed the project in force telling commissioners they would be subjected noise and excess traffic.

A motion by Commissioner Scott Kirouac to change zoning for the project died for lack of a second. But it may not be over, attorneys for the developer indicated there could now be legal action.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials say a couple of burglary suspects now have been identified. The two – described as young, white males, were seen breaking into the press box at the Durrah Martin Baseball complex in Avon Park.

One apparently was injured in the incident. Sheriff's officials have not released any names or other details.

Smoking and vaping will be off limits at certain Polk County parks. The county commission voted yesterday to ban smoking and vaping at public parks in unincorporated Polk.

The initial focus will be on active parks like youth sports complexes and playgrounds. The ordinance will go into effect once it's filed with the Secretary of State's office, but there's no word on when that will be. A group called Students Working against Tobacco pushed for the change. Commissioner George Lindsey says it's very encouraging whenever young people get involved, especially when it results in positive action like this.

Hardee county residents and local officials will gather today at Peace River Park to officially dedicate new improvements there. Work on the location includes sidewalks, trails, boardwalks plus bridge and other crossings. There's also a kayak launch, observation tower and campsite area.

The facility is off East Main Street in Wauchula across from Crews Park.

November 9

Highlands County could be home to a new water repository. Officials from the South Florida Water Management District reportedly are planning a 12,000 acre above-ground reservoir. The facility, that would hold up to 200,000 acre-feet of water would be located just southeast of Lake Istokpoga. The man-made lake would be surrounded by a retaining wall better than 30-feet high, with a 60-foot cutoff wall to prevent seepage.

The project, to be done by SFWMD and the Army Corps of Engineers is part of the Lake Okeechobee Component Reservoir program. Preliminary work on that program could start next year.

If you have any governmental business to accomplish, you might want to get it done today. Many state, federal, municipal and all Highlands County administrative offices will be closed tomorrow, in observance of Veterans Day.

They will resume business as usual on Monday.



The question of whether to allow more mobile home parks or fewer such developments in Highlands County, has been pushed back a bit. Due to the length of Tuesday's meeting, county commissioners' scheduled workshop on the subject now will be held on December 5th.

Commissioners sawed through a better than six hour session Tuesday, including a contentious zoning hearing.

Cars and drivers from the World Racing League are back in Sebring for their "Eastern Championship Finale." That event will run Friday, Saturday and Sunday with a pair of eight hour endurance races scheduled for the GT style cars on the world famous 3.74 mile circuit Saturday and Sunday.

Series officials say there are some teams in some of the classes currently tied for the points lead.

Some of the cars and drivers will be on track today, for a private test and tune session. This is one of 15 ticketed events this year at the Sebring International Raceway. They'll cap off 2023 next month with the Alan Jay Pistons & Props events for historic aircraft and race cars.

November 10

Its Veterans Day today – or rather, the government is observing it today by closing most offices. State and local units are – for the most part – shut down today in observance of the day itself, which officially is tomorrow.

There are Veterans Day observances planned for today, though ... South Florida State College has a Remembrance Ceremony on the circle at the main campus in Avon Park. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Michael Ryan will keynote that event. The Sebring High Show Choir is also set to perform there. The ceremony begins at 10:45.

The Military Sea Services Museum on Kenilworth Boulevard will be celebrating the US Marine Corps' Founding today with an ice cream socially from noon till 2pm today.

The Battle of Bands is bringing back their "You Served Us, Now We Serve You" event as a tailgate party for Veterans and friends, along with a car show from 4 till 10pm on Museum Avenue in Downtown Avon Park. Free Barbecue for Veterans, trophies for the best cars in the show, and free admission for everyone.

There will be a Veterans Day Parade in Sebring tomorrow, starting at Firemen's Field at 9:30 and heading toward downtown. Organizers plan food trucks, kids' games, a car show and entertainment till 10pm. And Sun 'N Lake of Sebring will hold a Veterans Day Ceremony at 11 tomorrow morning at the Veterans Memorial in front of the clubhouse.

Sebring is due to get a little bigger after the City Council agreed this week to a development agreement with the Martz Family Holdings for an 88 acre plot of land near the corner of Highway 27 and 66 south of town. The Martz family owns and operates Insight Auctioneers, currently located down Highway 66.

Lake Placid's Bicentennial Park is going to stay where it is, as it is after all. The land off Dal Hall Boulevard has a gazebo, picnic tables and playground equipment and had been on a lease from the Gissendaner Trust, but family members opted to sell the property and terminate the lease. The Town Council agreed to meet the original buyer's price and keep the land as a town park.

Initial filings for unemployment benefits in Florida dropped last week compared with the week prior, the U.S. Department of Labor said Thursday. New jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs, fell to 5,358 in the week ending November 4, down from 5,750 the week before, the Labor Department said. That tracks national figures, where nationwide, unemployment claims dropped to 217,000 last week, down 3,000 claims from the week prior on a seasonally adjusted basis.

November 13

The bridge by Jaxon's on Lake June was damaged over the weekend, when the structure was hit by a vehicle. According to reports, the driver may have been on the phone when her auto hit the span. It appears there may have been structural damage to the bridge, but the woman driving the car apparently suffered no injuries.

It's been a long, hard road for Avon Park city council members in their efforts to turn the operation of their municipal airport over to Florida Airport Management. Tonight, Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader will give the council a report on the results of a meeting he had recently in Atlanta with officials of the Federal Aviation Administration about a grant to underwrite the process. In other action, the council will continue holiday planning for the city in approving additional events during the Christmas Parade and setting some new activities in the annual Independence Day celebrations in the City of Charm.

November 14

Many people look outside to see the rocket launches from Cape Canaveral. Locally, lots of folks keep their eyes to the skies to see military aircraft practicing at the Avon Park Bombing Range. Air Force officials say they'll be holding exercises all this week at the facility. Sorties will run from early morning until late in the evening. Volume levels reportedly will be high. No word as to who will be using the range.

There will be a lot of activity at the Highlands County Fairgrounds as local third graders get an opportunity to learn about the agricultural underpinnings of Highlands County. Education stations range from Alligators to Beef, Caladiums, Citrus, Dairy and more. All public, private, and home school third graders are included in the program. You'll see a lot of red, blue and green cowboy hats – to distinguish which local community they represent.

Avon Park city council members sawed through a three hour meeting last night. Most of the session revolved around special events and the level of involvement by the city. At the behest of Councilman Jim Barnard, the board voted to up the event donation fund from \$12,000 to \$15,000. They also voted to set aside another \$10,000 to help pay for in-kind services such as road closures and trash collections for events. City Manager Mark Schrader revealed the city also has put out nearly \$4,000 to purchase Christmas decorations for the City of Charm.

It's been a long hard road for the City of Avon Park in their quest to turn over operation of their airport to Florida Airport Management. However, City Manager Mark Schrader says after a productive meeting

with the Federal Aviation Administration in Atlanta, the city is ready to move forward. Council members have approved a special November 30th meeting to tie up a contract and federal grant to help pay for the process. Under terms of the pact, FAM will pay \$84,000 a year to run the facility. When fully functional, they say the payment could balloon to as much as \$200,000 annually.

Hardee County Sheriff's officials say they recently have had an increase in 911 hang up calls. Officials say dispatchers take every 911 call seriously, and must track down the calls.

That takes time and effort and can place units unavailable for other calls.

They ask parents NOT to allow children to play with cell phones. If the phone has battery power, it can call 911 even without active service.

If you accidentally call 911, DO NOT hang up, and if you do, please answer when dispatchers call back. Simply explain the accidental dial.

Also, pay attention to smart watches, OnStar, and other emergency alert devices – which can send alerts.

November 15

It was a sad ending to a standoff in Venus yesterday when Sonny Ray Holland Sr. was shot and killed. It happened after he exchanged gunfire with a sheriff's SWAT Team. Highlands and Polk County sheriff's deputies apparently had tried to talk the 43-year-old Venus man out of the mobile home but they were unsuccessful.

After trading shots with Holland, the man ran back into the burning home where he died.

The original call had been for a domestic violence dispute. The victim was able to escape the Oliver Road residence. Two young children subsequently were released without incident after 16 hours of captivity.

The 10th judicial Circuit court now is investigating.

Avon Park city council members turned back a request from a Miami developer to increase zoning on a local property from low to medium density. The two acres off Cornell Street is designated for single family residential, however, developer Fidel Chooey indicated he wanted to put in duplexes.

After hearing from a potential neighbor – the council, by a 3-2 vote, went along with the city's planning & zoning board and deny the application.

Ag venture continues today at the Highlands County fairgrounds. That's where local third graders are invited to learn about the agricultural activities across the county. There are 14 stations, ranging from farm animals, to forestry, poultry, strawberries and grapes – among other crops.

All schools including government, private and home schoolers are included in the program. Last night a steak dinner and adult preview was held for the educational event.

Do you live in Hardee County? Do you have cattle? The Hardee County Sheriff's office says they have located and impounded a small herd. Among them are four black cows, a red cow with horns and a light brown cow.

They were found wandering near West Main Street in Wauchula.

November 16

When it comes to charitable giving, a new report says that the Sebring/Avon Park area is below the national average. The study by "Upgraded Points" indicates that among small US Metro areas, Highlands is 155th on the list.

The local numbers show that some 28-percent of taxpayers report charitable contributions, while the national average is nearly 33-percent. The analysis indicates the average amount contributed locally by folks is over \$1700.

The elf on the shelf will have to move over. Polk County officials have announced the "Sheriff on the Shelf" now is available. That's correct – parents now can have their own crime-fighting, children watching stuffed Grady Judd – just in time for the holiday season.

Just like other shelf-dwelling elves, he will watch over children to make certain they are nice and not naughty. And, officials say, he can stay on after Christmas.

The Sheriff on the shelf is \$20, with proceeds going to Polk Sheriff's charities. Sales are in-person and cash only.

November 17

It's going to be a packed weekend in Highlands County. First, the Master Gardeners will host their "Let it Grow" Festival at the Highlands County Agri-Civic Center. In addition to hundreds of plants that actually will grow here, there will be arts & crafts vendors, food trucks, a silent auction, raffles and classes. That'll run from 9-4.

From 5-10pm tomorrow evening, Heartland Horses & Equine Activities will host their annual Heartland Hoedown. Guests will see the drill team, meet the horses, eat and enjoy George Morris & The Lariat Band. That will be at the stables, just off College Drive in Avon Park behind South Florida State College.

A new local group is releasing their debut album on their own label. The Double Trouble X2 band will have the official rollout on Ashes & Embers records tomorrow night with a concert at the Tropical Winery in Lake Placid.

The band is known for their country and bluegrass performances with sisters Ashley & Emily Finke on twin fiddles.

The City of Frostproof, Florida has announced that once again, Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd will appear in their Christmas Parade. The processional is slated to run on Saturday December 2nd and is one of the longest in Polk County.

A Lakeland man is accused of setting a food pantry on fire. Polk County Sheriff's officials say deputies arrested Gordon Nelson for arson after the blaze at the New Testament Ministries Food Pantry in Lakeland.

Pantry co-founder Dais Abraham says the 60-year-old had been a regular at the property on Combee Road. Apparently, he said, just felt like setting it on fire.

Damages are estimated at 150-thousand dollars, and Abraham also says this will affect a lot of families who depend on the pantry for food and support – especially in the Thanksgiving season.

November 20

It's very foggy in parts of Highlands and surrounding counties this morning. Officials caution drivers to leave a bit early for their destinations, slow down and use their low-beam headlights for better visibility until the fog lifts.

Usually, the Highlands County commission meets the first and third Tuesday of each month – but not this week. Due to the Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday, the session has been pushed back. It will be held next Tuesday – which will be the fourth Thursday of the month.

It looks like the city of Frostproof is about to grow – quite a bit. Commissioners in "The Friendly City" will meet tonight and look at approving a planned unit development off West Mann Road.

Dubbed "The Crooked Lake Habitat," it will comprise about 100 acres, with better than 40 units – to be set on the property.

In other action, the council will look at a six-acre annexation and make plans for their December 2nd Christmas Parade.

Lake Wales police are looking for more information after a traffic stop netted them an arrest. Officials in the Crown Jewel of the Ridge stopped a car on Highway 60 East, but when they ran the vehicle, the Chevrolet Traverse came back as a car that had been stolen in Miami Shores.

They arrested but the driver, Tiya Sullivan of Texas and her passenger Jade Matthews of Louisiana. Authorities now are trying to determine what they were doing in Lake Wales.

November 21

You may think the rent is too darn high here – but according to a new report from Construction Coverage, rental costs in the Avon Park/Sebring metro area are below the national average.

The numbers show the median average rent here is \$1,261 dollars – with an average of \$1,198 for a two bedroom unit and \$912 for a single bedroom.

That compares with the national median average of \$1,782. Nationally, a 2-bedroom goes for \$1,716 and a single bedroom at \$1,423.

Overall, Highlands ranked 106th in the analysis of metro areas.

Usually, the Highlands County commission meets the first and third Tuesday of each month – but not this week. Due to the Thanksgiving holiday on Thursday, the session has been pushed back. It will be held next Tuesday – which will be the fourth Thursday of the month.

Thanksgiving is not until Thursday, but local veterans are getting a jump on the holiday. From 11 until 2 this afternoon, American Legion Post 25 in Lake Placid is hosting their sixth annual Veterans free dinner. Guests will include both veterans and first responders.

WVOJ's Donnie Shaffer will serve as master of ceremonies.

Yesterday, the Highlands County Veterans' Service office held their 11th annual Thanksgiving meal distribution for veterans. Volunteers handed out Thanksgiving dinners and gift cards as part of the event. November has been declared Veterans' Month in Highlands County.

Drugs could be a factor in a high-speed chase involving a Polk County man. FHP says Lakeland's Larry Marcus took Ecstasy and pain pills before leading troopers on a chase yesterday morning on I-75 North in Pasco County. He allegedly hit an SUV, kept going, got off the highway then back on the highway, this time going south. FHP says he hit another SUV, exited onto CR 577 and came to a stop on a sidewalk. Troopers found the 35-year-old lying down in the backseat and arrested him. They say he showed signs of impairment and was acting erratically. News Channel 8 reports Marcus is facing charges that include reckless driving and driving with a suspended license.

November 22

Just a reminder, if you'd forgotten – today's your last chance this week to transact any business with the County or local governments. All offices will – of course – be closed tomorrow on Thanksgiving, but most will take Friday off as well to let employees spend time with family – and on Friday, maybe, their credit cards.

Just to give you a heads-up for next week – a main Sebring thoroughfare will be closed down for a couple weeks starting Tuesday. Lakeview Drive just south of Veteran's Beach on the western shore of Lake Jackson will be closed for roadway maintenance. You can get back onto 27 – where they'd rather have through traffic anyway – at Vicki Drive and Bayview Streets.

Florida's largest grocery chain got a bit of a "hit" yesterday. Last month, three former assistant department managers from different states filed a federal lawsuit against Publix claiming Florida's largest grocer did not pay them for overtime work. Yesterday, a Tampa federal judge added hourly managers from store departments like bakery, deli, meat, produce, seafood and grocery. Assistant department managers and department managers worked about three to five hours overtime without pay every week, according to the lawsuit.

An annual event to help the less fortunate this season kicks off this weekend – the annual Alan Jay, Highlands Sheriff's Department and Highlands Radio Group Toy Drive. New, unwrapped toys can be dropped off at any Alan Jay Dealership in Highlands County or at the Highlands Radio Group Studios on Highway 27 North on Fairmount Cinema Plaza before December 8. If you know a family in need, log on to [copschristmas.com](http://copschristmas.com) – this drive gets vetted, by the by, by the Cops Adapt unit to make sure the requests are real, so you know the toys are going where they're needed.

A train derailed in Fort Meade early yesterday morning near the Mosaic Plant. The Polk County Sheriff's office says it happened at 1:47 am; 10 cars came off the track. There were no reported injuries. Officials said there wasn't a hazmat situation.

With the Black Friday shopping crunch less than 48 hours away, it's a good time to remind you that the two busiest shopping days of the year are when the highest number of fraudulent credit card purchases are made. Buying online? Make sure it's a trusted site. Buying in person? Watch the card, use a chip card reader whenever you can and don't lose sight of the card when you hand it to a clerk.



November 23

Happy Thanksgiving! That may be a reminder to folks with trash cans out waiting for County pickup ... this one of those relatively rare holidays when the County's contractor does NOT do routes. Thursday schedules this week move to Friday, and Friday moves to Saturday.

Your local firefighters remind you to stay safe around hot stuff today – especially hot things you don't use all that often, like turkey fryers. Keep it outdoors, off wooden deck materials, and PLEASE don't try to deep fry a frozen turkey. It almost never ends well, and when it doesn't it's never pretty.

Word is, the old Wachovia Bank Building on North Ridgewood in Downtown Sebring is a step closer to being usable again. The Downtown CRA is paying for almost \$264,000 in mold and asbestos remediation work in advance of transferring the building to Carolee Blackmon, who has plans for office space, conference areas, a restaurant and other amenities. Closing the deal is expected in early January.

Two people on board a plane that made an emergency landing in Lakeland on Wednesday have a little more to be grateful for this Thanksgiving. According to the Polk County Sheriff's Office, the agency received word that a plane had disappeared from radar shortly after 8 a.m. Deputies say they found the aircraft, which reportedly suffered engine failure, in a field outside town. Investigators say nobody was injured during the emergency landing and the plane does not appear to be damaged. The FAA is responding and will be conducting an investigation.

November 24

Black Friday is officially in progress. After public pressure a couple years ago prompted most major chains to close on Thanksgiving Day, the rush began early this morning. Wal Mart stores posted their opening times at 5am this morning, Home Depot and Lowe's stores opened at 6am. Down at Lakeshore Mall, Beall's website posted a 6:30 opening and Belk's said they're open as of 7am. Nationally, economists are projecting this Holiday shopping rush to produce 3.5% to 4% more than last year.

A few sirens out there Wednesday night as Highlands County Fire rescue crews sent three engines up State Highway 17 North to a reported car fire, where they found a fully engulfed car with a ruptured fuel tank. No injuries reported, the fire doused down with foam – the car? It's toast.

The County's annual Christmas Parade season starts Monday in Avon Park at 7pm, down the mile-long mall on Main Street. The Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring photos with Santa and Mrs. Claus at the Hotel Jacaranda from 2 till 4pm, with Face Painting for the kids at the Chamber office from 4 till 6pm. Sponsors promise food trucks and vendors from 4-8pm, so take the afternoon and enjoy the charm/

By the by, just a reminder – if your County trash pickup day is normally today, yesterday moved the schedule back a day this week only, Thursday schedules this week move to today, and Friday pickups move to Saturday.

Sebring Police Detectives could use your help in solving a likely crime from last Saturday. Officers conducted a welfare check on an apartment at 2180 Lakeview Drive in Sebring last Saturday morning, and found 27-year-old Jessica Yazmin Phillips dead inside. Investigators say she was likely killed as the result of a domestic violence-related incident. Jessica's boyfriend was named a person of interest – when located up in Sunrise, a police-standoff followed and Moore ended up deceased with an apparent self-



inflicted gunshot wound. Anyone with information on events leading up to last Saturday, please call the Sebring Police Department at 471-5108. Anonymous tips can also go through Heartland Crime Stoppers at 1-800-226 TIPS.

November 27

The first of Highlands County's Christmas parades will step off tonight in Avon Park. More than 80 units including floats, bands, marching groups and others will make their way down Main Street starting at 7:00.

Beginning at 2:00 this afternoon there will be free photos available with Santa & Mrs. Claus at the Jacaranda hotel.

Starting at 4pm, the Avon Park Chamber will host face painting at their headquarters with food trucks and vendors set up at various locations along Main Street.

Motorists are reminded that Main Street will be closed to traffic starting at 5:30 this evening.

Highlands County commissioners will meet tomorrow morning in a session that was pushed back a week, due to the Thanksgiving holiday season.

To start the meeting, the commission will get a new chair and vice chair for the upcoming year.

One of the big items on the agenda will be an Aquaculture Work Plan for Lake Istokpoga. The program will see muck removed from the big lake in an effort to improve water quality.

Proponents say it will be a test program for other parts of the state.

In other action, commissioners will look at an asphalt binder for the county's asphalt plant and consider a pay hike for the county's Parks & Facilities Director.

The Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency and the Sebring city council will get together tomorrow evening for a special session. At issue will be the proposed Pedestrian Safety and Lighting program.

They'll look at a plan that could cost between a half and three-quarters of a million dollars. The session will commence at 5:30pm tomorrow in the Jack Stroup Civic Center.

A Winter Haven youth was injured in an all-terrain vehicle crash in Lake Wales. According to reports, the 13-year-old was riding the ATV at Indian Lakes Estates when the accident occurred.

Authorities have not indicated how it happened, but said the teen was not wearing a helmet at the time.

He was airlifted to the hospital with facial injuries and a brain bleed.

There's no word as to his condition.

A child is dead after a crash involving a police truck in Auburndale. Polk County sheriff's officials say a police officer was responding to an emergency when they crashed into a car that entered its path.

Deputies say the officer had their lights and siren activated.

A five-year-old girl in the backseat of the car was killed in the mishap.

The driver broke her wrist, but the police officer apparently was not hurt. Investigators have not confirmed if the child was wearing a seatbelt.

The sheriff's office says no charges are expected. Family members say the girl's name was Jalina Anglin, and she died of head trauma.

November 28

The Highlands County commission has a new chairman. First term commissioner Kevin Roberts was selected to chair the board for the upcoming year.

In other action, the commission gave their blessing to the proposed Aquaculture Work Program for Lake Istokpoga. The South Florida Water Management District program actually has nothing to do with commissioners, but they went on record supporting the program – which will be a test program for other parts of the state.

Without comment, the commission approved a new job description for the Parks & Facilities Director.

The Sebring Community Redevelopment Agency and the Sebring city council will get together this evening for a special session. At issue will be the proposed Pedestrian Safety and Lighting program. They'll look at a plan that could cost between a half and three-quarters of a million dollars. The session will commence at 5:30pm in the Jack Stroup Civic Center.

A Sebring man reportedly has been killed in a traffic crash near Lake Wales. Polk County Sheriff's officials say the driver of a GMC pickup died when his truck ran into the back of a semi tractor-trailer rig. The man's name has not been released, pending notification of next of kin. Early reports indicate the 18-wheeler was making a U-Turn near Harbor Drive when the Sierra pickup hit the back of the trailer.

Preparations are getting underway today for the last big race of the year at the Sebring International Raceway. Competitors from Historic Sports Car Racing will start loading in their cars today for the Alan Jay Pistons & Props event.

That includes both vintage and historic race cars and airplanes. Special races during the weekend include the BRM V/GTC Endurance Challenge, the Stoner Car Care Global GT Race, and the Sasco Sports I/A Challenge and RS Cup Races.

Cars will be on track for test and tune sessions tomorrow.

It was a great kickoff for the Christmas season in Avon Park last night as dozens of entries made their way down the Mile Long Mall for the annual Christmas parade. Organizers believe it may have been a record crowd for the event, which included floats, bands, marching units and other celebrants opening the parade season in central Florida. There also was a holiday market, with various vendors set up along Main Street before the parade began. This Friday will be the annual Sebring Christmas Parade, with parades scheduled Saturday in Frostproof and in Wauchula.

November 29

Highlands county officials have released a year-end "State of the County" video. The 15-minute presentation represents a review of many of the activities by the county. The offerings range from the creation of a new department, the hiring of new employees and promotions, to various grants that were obtained for county projects.

Also included were mentions of activities such as participation in the Highlands County Fair, the creation of a centennial mural and the promotion of tourist activities.

The video is available on YouTube.

A couple of traffic stops in Avon Park led Highlands County Sheriff's deputies to a pair of drug busts. The first incident began on Alice Nelson Street in the City of Charm.

When driver Derrick Tarome Hawthorne began to walk away from the scene, he was detained. Inside the car, deputies found a pair of backpacks containing – among other things – fentanyl, heroine and a handgun.

The 25-year-old Hawthorne now faces drug trafficking counts and possession of a handgun by a convicted felon.

Later, deputies made a stop on Main Street on Memorial Drive, where they found 38-year-old William Louie Lockett. He already was wanted on a warrant so he was taken into custody.

Inside his vehicle was marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamine. He was charged with drug trafficking counts. A passenger in the car, 30-year-old Victoria Lynn Dziedzic of Sebring was charged with cocaine trafficking.

All the suspects were taken to the Highlands County jail.

Polk County Sheriff's officials now have released the name of that Sebring man who was killed in a two-vehicle accident near Lake Wales.

Deputies say 76-year-old Gary Blevins died when his GMC pickup ran into the back of a semi tractor-trailer rig.

Apparently, the 18-wheeler was making a U-Turn near Harbor Drive when Blevins' Sierra pickup hit the back of the trailer.

Highlands County sheriff's officials are looking for the owner – or owners – of a number of cows.

A small herd has been impounded and is being held at Animal Services off Heywood Taylor Blvd. So far, the boarding fee is over \$600 for the group, and the meter is running.

The animals are described as a solid black cow with a yellow ear tag, a cream yearling heifer, a black heifer with a large, white large dot on her face, black with white on the underbelly bull calf, a black heifer calf, 3 solid red cows, a red with white face cow with a red tag, a white cow, and a black cow.

If they're not claimed by Friday, officials say they'll be put up for auction.

There are cars on the track at the Sebring International Raceway as competitors begin test & tune sessions for this weekend's Alan Jay Pistons & Props event. Historic Sports Car Racing are staging the last big race for 2023 out at the track.

More than a dozen different classes of cars – including vintage and historic vehicles – are on course today. Qualifying and racing begins tomorrow.

The event runs through Sunday.

November 30

Competition gets underway today at the Sebring International Raceway as all classes in the Alan Jay Pistons & Props event take to the historic circuit for qualifying and racing. Historic Sports Car Racing is sanctioning the last big race of the year at S-I-R.

Qualifying will be held through the afternoon with the BRM V/GTC Endurance Challenge slated for 3:00, followed by the Stoner Car Care Global GT Race.

This evening at 7:00 will be a classic Thursday night practice.

Avon Park city council will hold a special session this evening. They'll try and wrap up a lease agreement with Florida Airport Management to take over operations of the airfield at the City of Charm. It has been a years' long process as the city has been working on a massive grant program with the Federal Aviation Administration to facilitate the takeover.

As an addendum, the council will look at a proposed new lien reduction program for the city. The meeting will commence at 6pm.

Summer is over, but apparently the mosquito problem in central Florida is not. Highlands County officials have released a flyer on mosquito safety and prevention. It is in both English and Spanish for residents who do not habla.

Hardee officials will continue their spraying program today over Bowling Green, Wauchula and Zolfo Springs.

Aerial flights will be done during the day for the purpose of surveying the planned areas to be sprayed. Although daytime aerial spraying will NOT be conducted, no specific timeframe for spraying has been released.

December 1

Its Christmas Parade season in Highlands County, and the second of the big downtown parades is tonight in Sebring. Lineup will be along the Sebring Parkway just north of Ridgewood beginning at 5:30pm – organizers say it's a y'all come format for registered units in the lineup – first in line leaves first. The parade itself starts at 7pm up Ridgewood, around the Circle, down South Commerce to the Fairgrounds. Wauchula and Frostproof do their parades tomorrow night – Lake Placid's downtown parade is next Saturday.

The Sebring Rotary Club's annual "Circle of Cans" is on till 3pm today. Nonperishable foods and cash for the Salvation Army – bring some extra along if you drive through the Downtown Circle today.

The track's "hot" this weekend at Sebring International Raceway with the annual Alan Jay Pistons and Props event on through Sunday. The weekend is being run by Historic Sport scar Racing, meaning you'll see a ton of cars with a ton of history taking on the famous race track. The "Props" portion of the weekend is tonight when vintage aircraft and warbirds arrive at the track. They'll taxi down the back stretch, then be on display in the Paddock area.

We've got a bit of an algae problem in the County's lakes after a long, warm summer. Enough so the Florida Department of Health has issued a health alert for the presence of harmful blue-green algal toxins at the Lake Glenada Boat Ramp in Avon Park. The Department looked at samples taken a week or so ago and advises the public to exercise caution in the part of the lake – don't drink, swim, wade, use personal watercraft, water ski or boat in waters where there is a visible bloom. And, keep pets away from the area.

A local couple is in the clear in that long-running lawsuit over the vacant Kenilworth Lodge in Downtown Sebring. Judge Peter Estrada agreed to drop Mark and Madge Stewart as defendants in the 2014 lawsuit by TD Bank alleging two loans on the historic building were in default and asking for a foreclosure judgement on the properties. The Stewarts gave up control of the business in 2009, after which things went south and came to a head when the building was condemned by the city over fire code violations in the summer of 2016.

December 4

It will be double duty for Highlands County commissioners tomorrow. First, they will meet for their regular morning session, they will hold a special afternoon workshop where they will discuss the proliferation of mobile home communities in the county.

Among other things, at their regular meeting the commission will mull over adding additional roads to their reconstruction program.

It was quite foggy across Highlands County this morning. School officials say busses were not held up, but drivers were cautioned to use discretion.

Motorists were reminded to leave early, slow down and use their low beams for better visibility. It's burned off now.

No traffic or other fog-related problems have been reported.

It was a weekend of Christmas parades across central Florida with a processional in Sebring Friday evening, followed by parades in Wauchula and Frostproof on Saturday.

Only one Christmas parade remains in the area, that will be this coming Saturday in Lake Placid.

The city of Frostproof could gain a substantially larger footprint tonight. Council members in the Friendly City will consider the second and final reading for the Crooked Lake Habitat. The Planned Unit Development, just off Wes Mann Road, will comprise just over 100 acres, and is set for two-acre plots.

December 5

Highlands County commissioners will have a special workshop this afternoon. They'll be discussing the proliferation of mobile home parks across the county and the future kinds of development here.

Commissioners say this is only a workshop for the board, and there will not be any opportunity for public comment.

This morning, commissioners added a number of roads to their reconstruction list, and observed the one year anniversary of Laurie Hurner as County Administrator.

Highlands County School District officials held their Summit Awards last night. Teacher of the Year honors went to Janet Harris of Fred Wild Elementary. The School-Related Employee of the Year for 2023 is Kathryn Church from Sebring Middle School.

Hardee County health officials have issued a mosquito-borne illness alert following multiple cases of dengue fever there. Spokeswoman Kristin Casey said it was unclear how many residents had been affected, indicating "several" had contracted the disease and now are recovering.

There also are some other cases that are under investigation. The county has been spraying for mosquitos – and at least one more application is anticipated.

A Frostproof youth has been injured in a 2-vehicle accident just north of The Friendly City. Apparently, the mishap occurred when a gray Kia Rio made a left turn in front of an oncoming Chevy Pickup.

A 16-year-old Frostproof youth, who was riding in one of the vehicles, was airlifted to the hospital. Their

name and extent of injuries has not yet been revealed.  
The accident remains under investigation.

## December 6

Units from Desoto City, Placid Lakes and Leisure Lakes were called to a structure fire off Max Avenue in Sebring early this morning.

Reportedly, two occupants of the home were able to escape the blaze after a smoke detector awakened them.

No cause was listed, but the fire has been deemed accidental, no injuries reported. The Red Cross is assisting the homeowner.

Highlands County sheriff's officials are looking for a man named "Tree." The suspect is wanted in connection with the robbery of a woman at an Anytime Teller Machine at the Avon Park location of the Heartland National Bank.

Neither the name of the suspect or the victim have been released, but the suspect is described as a six-foot tall, thin black male. At the time he was wearing a black sweatshirt, black pants, and a green beanie.

Law enforcement officials are asking anyone with any information on the incident to contact them. They say all details will be kept confidential.

Highlands County commissioners held a workshop yesterday where they discussed the proliferation of mobile homes in the county. The public was not allowed to speak, but county staff produced a number of "experts" on the subject.

During the hour and 40-minute session, commissioners learned that the county currently has more than 14,000 mobile home lots and is zoned for the addition more than 4,600 mobile homes – either on individual lots or in parks.

Commissioners were told their strategic planning should include diverse housing solutions with a wide angle view on the community's development.

A teenager is dead after a crash in Polk County. Lakeland Police say a 15-year-old boy was riding his bike to Central Florida Aerospace Academy yesterday morning when he was hit by a school bus. He was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead.

There were eight passengers on the Schools of McKeel Academy bus, but no one onboard was hurt. A GoFundMe page identified the teen as Jaxon Crabtree. Over 100 people have already donated about eight thousand dollars for funeral and medical expenses.

## December 7

A high speed chase has sent a Highlands County warrant suspect to the hospital. According to Highlands County Sheriff's officials, 48-year-old David Allan Kingsley, Jr. fled his North Lake Drive home in Lorida, as deputies arrived yesterday to serve a warrant.

A chase ensued, which went from Highlands into Okeechobee County. Kingsley reportedly ran over stop sticks twice, first losing a rear tire, then rolling his car.

Kingsley was airlifted to a trauma center in serious condition. He now faces additional counts. Officials gave no indication on the original warrant charges.



Highlands County school board members have been briefed on a new initiative in the system. Known as "Project Search," the program is for students with disabilities. Working with Advent hospital, it provides real-life job experience for the youngsters.

Currently eight students are involved with the program which includes tasks in various departments including warehouse, emergency and food & nutrition.

Coach Buddy Hunter, who spearheads the program, invited board members to come and observe the initiative in action.

December 8

Round three of Highlands County's three Christmas Parades is tomorrow night in Lake Placid, beginning at 7pm. Lineup along Dal Hall, down Main to Interlake and back.

And the Sebring Lake Jackson Boat Parade is back tomorrow night. That starts at 7pm around Lake Jackson, with festooned boats beginning behind Don Jose's and – this year – going clockwise around the lake until they get back where they started.

Just in case you were worried about smoke south of Lake Placid yesterday, west of town off Highway 70, that WAS a controlled burn. Pretty big one, too, encompassing 750 acres. Fire Rescue says if you aren't sure and think a fire may be out of control, don't hesitate to call. They'd rather explain it than get surprised by one that gets out of control.

Sebring's Museum of The Arts Building will have a new occupant soon – Highlands Lakeside Theatre. The City Council this week approved the Theatre Company's proposed use for the building over a competing proposal by the Sebring Historical Society. The theatre plans on using the building for its theatre education and other programs – the lease will only run a year, in a nod to the Downtown CRA's development plans for the waterfront area, which don't all include the museum building.

If your Christmas tree is up, you just added something to your home that's beautiful, and can stay that way if you take care of it ... Highlands County Fire Rescue remind you that real trees need to be watered daily. When the weather's cool outside, indoor humidities get real low and it doesn't take long for that tree to get dry as – well, tinder.

December 11

It'll be a twin bill for the Avon Park city council tonight, as they first hold their regular meeting, then will go into an executive session. The agenda shows the council first will take care of a lot of municipal utility issues, including a drinking water project, a sewage treatment & disposal remediation plan and a storm water assessment presentation.

Council members also will look at hiring a legal team to take care of foreclosures in the City of Charm and will mull over a number of event requests. Following their regular meeting they will hold an executive session to consider a collective bargaining agreement with union firefighters.

This will be the last meeting of the year for the Avon Park council.

Another candidate has thrown her hat into the ring for a seat on the School Board of Highlands County. Lauren Bush has filed to run for the District 2 seat, taking on longtime incumbent Donna Howerton. Bush already has made her first campaign appearance, riding in the Lake Placid Christmas Parade this past weekend.



The Lake Placid Christmas Parade came and went this past Saturday, marking the end of the processions in central Florida. Christmas activities will continue.

Tonight will be Christmas in the Park in Avon Park with performances by the Avon Park Elementary, Avon Park Middle, and Avon Park High School choirs. That will be in Donaldson Park.

The Carousel of Lights will continue in downtown Sebring until Christmas Eve and the Christmas in the Village drive-thru will be held this weekend at the Florida Flywheelers Club off the Avon Park Cutoff Road.

Some blustery weather moved through Highlands County overnight. There were some reports of lawn ornaments and trash cans being blown over. However, law enforcement officials say there have been no reports of flooding or appreciable wind damage.

A Bartow police officer was injured last night in a traffic crash. It happened as the Sergeant was investigating a pedestrian-related traffic accident on Van Fleet Drive East. He apparently was struck by a mini-van.

The Sergeant was taken to a trauma center with what were described as non-life threatening injuries. No word on the driver of the mini-van or the pedestrian-related mishap.

## December 12

First it was their airport, now the Avon Park City Council is looking to turn over management of the city's community center. Council members last night voted to let the Heartland Cultural Alliance take over management of the facility.

Now to be known as the Community & Cultural Center, HCA members will operate the building, taking care of rental and maintenance of the facility. Spokeswoman Gaylin Thomas said the action will cement the "Cultural Hub" of The City of Charm – pointing to the nearby Depot Museum and the Avon Park branch of the countywide library system as part of a complex.

The HCA already operates the Peter Paul Roberts Museum of Art on the top floor of the center.

The Florida Department of Education has released its school grades for the past school year. Highlands county overall got a straight "C" under the current standards – a grade that has not changed for years. Hardee and Polk also scored "C" grades.

Under the standards, a grade of "C" is between 33 and 49-percent out of 100.

Locally, only Woodlawn, Cracker Trail, and Sun 'N Lake elementary had "B" scores.

The numbers represent Florida's first-in-the-nation transition to using progress monitoring instead of traditional high stakes testing.

## December 13

An early morning traffic accident south of Sebring reportedly has claimed a life. Florida Highway Patrol officials say a 62-year-old Lake Placid woman died, when her sport utility vehicle was hit from behind by a semi tractor-trailer rig.

Florida Highway Patrol officials say the car was stopped at a traffic light at Highway 27 and US 98 when she was rear-ended by the big rig. The Lake Placid woman was pronounced dead at the scene.

Highway 98 was closed for several hours while a homicide investigation took place.

Avon Park city council members have gotten in under the wire, passing a resolution that would allow them to impose an assessment on local residences and businesses to establish a storm water utility in the City of Charm.

Consultants compared the fee to the city's fire assessment, with the money to go to treating runoff water. The resolution is non-binding, any further action may be taken in 2024.

Highlands County Sheriff's officials have announced that their confidential TIPS line now has a new number. Those who want to give information to law enforcement about crime, but remain anonymous, now can call 1-800-400-TIPS, that's 1-800-400-8477,

There also is a P3TIPS app, that can be downloaded onto a smart phone.

Authorities remind users that they always will remain anonymous no matter how tips are submitted. The information then will be forwarded to law enforcement for follow up.

If an arrest is made based on an individual's tip, they will be eligible for a cash reward of up to \$9,500.

December 14

One man is dead and another is in jail following a shooting yesterday afternoon in Avon Park. The incident occurred during an altercation at South Verona Avenue and East Hal MacRae Blvd about 1:45 yesterday afternoon.

Arrested in the incident was 28-year-old Javionne Floyd. The name of the victim has not been released. So far, there's no indication as to what sparked the confrontation.

It will be next year before the Avon Park city council decides what to do about coordinating the Christmas decor in the City of Charm. Some members had looked to appoint a committee to work on lights, structures and other pieces to decorate the mile long mall, however, concerns about Sunshine Law violations for a municipal committee stalled the discussion.

Council members now are looking at community groups and citizens to get together among themselves to bring forward thoughts, ideas and suggestions for the 2024 display.

Highlands County School officials have been taken to task for allowing Christmas in the classroom.

Parent David Chase, who says he is not religious, objected, saying he had enrolled his 4-year-old daughter in public school to keep her from being indoctrinated.

He said his daughter had been taught Christmas Carols and had seen "a visitor from the North Pole." He said the activities had caused the girl to question the family about why they do not observe the holiday as do others.

In light of the ongoing issues in Israel, the Highlands Tea Party will hold another flag wave in support of the Israeli people the event will run from 3:30 until 5:00 this evening in front of the Fairmount Square shopping plaza – on Highway 27, just north of the intersection with the Sebring Parkway.

One of two men arrested for grand theft in Polk County apparently knows just what he's gotten himself into.

Polk County Sheriff's deputies picked up 24-year-old Tamari Lucas of Tampa and later a 14-year-old who was caught driving a stolen pickup truck.

Upon his arrest, after realizing he was in Polk and not Osceola county, Lucas was caught on body camera footage saying, "Oh no! Not Grady Judd."

In a press conference after the two suspects had been arrested, Sheriff Judd said the department's goal is to give the two a "Christmas present from Santa Grady" of "an orange jumpsuit and a trip to... jail..."

December 15

Bad news for fans of the old Santa Rosa Hotel in Downtown Sebring. Not only has the building permit for the old building for work on the old building expired, matters have been complicated further. Before the permit can be renewed, an inspection will be needed, and with a collapse of a portion of the third story walls, city officials say the entire project may need a whole new permit. The current owner of the Santa Rosa bought the place on North Ridgewood in December of last year. The prior ownership had been holding it since 2015, but had racked up code enforcement fines over \$300,000.

A local fundraising drive with a national inspiration comes to a head tomorrow morning. “Wreaths across America” is a project with goal of laying a wreath on the grave of every fallen veteran in time for the holiday. Locally, Lakeview Memorial Gardens has been spearheading the drive and holds a pre-wreath laying ceremony tomorrow morning at 11:40am, followed by placement of wreaths on the graves at that location with the names of each veteran said aloud. Lakeview Memorial Gardens is on Memorial Drive between Sebring and Avon Park.

There’s evidently a door-to-door scammer out there asking for money to support local school sports teams – or, on occasion, posing as a solar power salesperson. The fellow was door knocking in Sun N Lake and Sylvan Shores earlier this week claiming to be supporting Lake Placid JV basketball. The school says they have no affiliation with him, and if you do get a visitor of that sort, a call to the sheriff’s department is in order.

If you’re heading out of town by car over the holidays, the good news is that gas prices in Florida are at their lowest of the year. This last week’s AAA gas price survey for the state found the state’s average price per gallon at \$2.91 a gallon, versus the national average of just over \$3.10. Sound a little low for what we see around here? Sebring and vicinity WAS listed as the third-highest metro area in the state, with a \$3.09 average. The cheapest? Fort Walton Beach, at \$2.83.

Highlands County Sheriff’s deputies think they made a dent in the drug trafficking business with a bust on a home Wednesday on Cherokee Drive in Avon Park. 36-year-old Omar Juqsue Rushing was allegedly trafficking drugs out of the home, selling up to 58 grams of fentanyl-laced methamphetamine at a time. Rushing was being held without bond yesterday on eight drug-related counts and a gun charge. Another man living in the home, 58-year-old Willie Henry Smith was also arrested. Detectives say the bust came after months of undercover work.

December 18

Although there are no local statistics, this weekend’s storm is responsible for record rainfall totals across central Florida. Breaking records were Orlando International Airport, plus the cities of Sanford and Leesburg.

Brevard County registered the highest total with 11 inches of rain.

The weather caused some cancellations locally, but there was no damage reported.

Meanwhile, flooding could be an issue along the First Coast today in northern Florida. Meanwhile the National Weather Service has a Coastal Flood Watch.

Highlands County Sheriff’s deputies culminated a several month undercover investigation over the weekend with a drug bust. Lawmen raided a house on Cherokee Avenue in Avon Park where they

arrested 36-year-old Omar Juqsue Rushing.

Among other things, Rushing was charged with trafficking fentanyl and methamphetamine as well as possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Also living in the home was 58-year-old Willie Henry Smith. He was arrested and charged with possession of cocaine, possession of drug equipment, and possession of a weapon or ammunition by a convicted felon.

Highlands County firefighters had some work over the weekend, units from West Sebring were called to East Claridge Avenue in Avon Park, to extinguish the flames from a pile burn that got out of control. There were no injuries and no buildings were damaged. The Florida Forest Service is investigating.

Dozens of volunteers turned out over the weekend to decorate the final resting place of local veterans. It was part of the "Wreaths across America" program, where more than 500 sponsored wreaths were placed on veteran's graves in the Garden of Valor at Lakeview Memorial Gardens.

## December 19

Residents in the city of Avon Park are under a "Boil Water" notice for the foreseeable future. There was a break this morning in a 12-inch line out by the Bell Street water plant that dropped water pressure to near zero in some parts of the City of Charm.

Any and all water to be used for drinking or cooking will need to be disinfected by boiling, bleach or purification tablets.

The notice will remain in effect until a bacteriological survey shows that the water is safe to drink.

Two people were killed last night in a traffic crash south of Sebring. Florida Highway Patrol report a motorcycle slammed into the side of a pickup at the intersection of US 98 and Madrid drive shortly after 6:30 last night.

The two riders on the cycle were killed. A 42-year-old man and an 53-year-old woman. Both were listed out of Ontario City, California. Both were pronounced dead at the scene.

The driver of the pickup – a 40-year-old Sebring man, was not injured. The roadway was closed for several hours. No charges have been filed.

Highlands County commissioners this morning approved a request to re-allocate funds for the Spring Lake fire station. The building is slated to be a cookie-cutter style building that will be a prototype for other fire stations in the county.

Apparently, the county may have to look for a new site for the building, inasmuch as the current property may not be able to contain the structure.

Sebring city council members will be looking at a couple of large annexation proposals when they meet tonight for their last meeting of 2023.

One will be a nearly 88-acre plot at the intersection of US Highway 27 and State Road 66. That will be the new location of Insight Auctioneers.

A second will be 18 parcels of land off the Panther Parkway,

In other action, the council will look at naming a committee to search for a building official

Two men have been accused of breaking into a church in Lakeland.

Polk County sheriff's officials announced yesterday that Nelson Newman and Ronald McClain were arrested Saturday. The 59-year-old Newman and 27-year-old McClain allegedly broke into Christ

Memorial Baptist Church in Lakeland and stole 300 dollars' worth of food.

They've been charged with burglary, theft and tampering with evidence. Sheriff Grady Judd says the two have a combined 36 prior arrests.

After holding a workshop on how to handle the proliferation of mobile home parks in the county, Highlands County commissioners will hear a couple more requests for such communities at their meeting this morning.

The first is a 9-and-a-half acre tract off Tractor Road in the Desoto City area. The other proposal is for a 5-acre parcel off Brunns Road, west of Sebring.

In other action, the board will look at a request to re-zone 610 acres of land off US 98 from conservation lands to an agricultural designation. Owners say they want to use the property for farming and cattle grazing.

## December 22

There's one more chapter to tell in that incident earlier this week where two adults burned a child's belongings, threatened him as well, and ended in an officer-involved shooting. This chapter's a good one. The nine-year old boy at the center of the incident is heading home to his family, with a load of Christmas toys from the Highlands and Polk County Sheriff's Departments, along with other donors. There were toys – and clothes, including a new pair of Crocs to replace the ones burned in the fire. Oh – and a new plush toy to replace the one detectives gave him during the interview after the incident. He gave the first one away to another child while being sheltered by DCF.

That blue-green algae alert around the boat ramp at Lake Glenada has been expanded to include Lake Placid Lake in Lake Placid. The Florida Department of Health has issued a health alert for the two areas in response to water samples taken earlier this month. Do not drink, swim, wade, use personal watercraft, water ski lets pets near the water or boat in waters where there is a visible bloom. You CAN eat the fish – fillets from otherwise healthy fish caught in freshwater lakes experiencing blooms is safe, but clean and cook 'em well.

The County Commission dodged a potentially testy exchange with neighbors this week when reports had circulated that a plot of land at 2000 Brunns Road north of Hammock Road was to be developed into more high-density housing. Not so, says owner Dan Littlefield. He told the Commission this week that his only plan is to put a barn on the land and would really like it re-zoned back to agricultural, leaving it in a natural state. County Zoning personnel said it's a bit too late to move it back to agricultural zoning but Board members sent kudos Littlefield's way.

South Florida State College's Lake Placid campus has a new interim Director. Asena Mott has been in charge of the college's Desoto Campus and takes over for retiring Director Randall Paepflow. Mott will retain her duties for the DeSoto campus during her tenure as Interim Director in Lake Placid.

## December 26

If you're on the County's trash pickup service, just a reminder – today's Monday's trash day, and pickups will run a day later than normal this week. Its bulk trash week, by the way, so those extra boxes the kids tore through yesterday morning can disappear from your curb when they do the weekly pickups.

Sebring Police detectives say they still haven't got any suspects in that volley of gunfire last Tuesday night in downtown Sebring, and they could use your help. 36 year old Christopher Dupree was found at the scene in Washington Heights with a gunshot wound but still alive. If you know anything about events leading up to the incident shortly after 7pm that night, call the Sebring Police Department or Crime stoppers at 800-400-TIPS, or log on to [heartlandcrimestoppers.com](http://heartlandcrimestoppers.com). Yes, you CAN remain anonymous.

New fire stations for Spring Lake and Lake Placid ARE on the way – but the County Commission decided last week that a delay could save money and headaches later on by redesigning the facilities to be scalable allowing easier addition of more vehicle bays in the future as growth warrants. The Commission approved a \$350,000 allocation from reserve funds to hire a Lakeland architect to design physical plants that could be added to in the future. The Commission was told that construction should be finished by 2027 at latest.

The next step in the penalty phase for accused SunTrust shooter Zephan Xaver will be January 2 after a dustup between defense attorneys and state prosecutors over Xaver's medical records last week. After the exchanges placed Xaver's attorneys in a position they said made them potential witnesses, the matter was continued until the second. Xaver has pled guilty to the January 2019 slayings – jury selection for the penalty phase is scheduled for later in January.

December 27

If you take advantage of the extended three-hour VPK "enrichment" program at the Highlands County Schools' Pre-K Center next year, be prepared to pay a bit for it. The School Board last week agreed to institute a \$50 weekly fee for the extended hours at the center for the 2024-2025 school year. The three-hour morning and afternoon session will remain free, but parents who use the extra hours will be asked for \$10 a day to cover the costs.

The County School Board says it's getting hoisted on the petard of some state regulations designed to prevent colleges in the state to give preference to so-called "woke" political views in procurement and purchasing. The legislation with that intent, said some members, may also require the County's schools to hire blind while hiring training services for staff – one declared early candidate in next year's elections, Lauren Bush, told the Board last week that one upcoming teacher training session includes social justice material that both she and current members found objectionable.

The annual Leapfrog reports for local hospitals are out and among the high notes, Advent Health Lake Placid was named one of Florida's top Teaching Hospitals. Family and Internal Medicine residencies are new this year at the Lake Placid campus, with 19 Internal Medicine residents and 16 in the family medicine program. Advent Health Wauchula scored a top grade among rural hospitals in the same report. The Fall 2023 Leapfrog safety ratings rate Advent's Sebring and Lake Placid campuses as "A" rated for overall patient safety ... the only "A" scores given in the County.

A Christmas weekend tragedy up in Polk County took the life of a 40 year old Plant City woman Christmas Eve. The woman was riding her motorized wheelchair on a street in Lakeland when she was struck and killed by a 67 year old Plant City man with a blood alcohol content nearly double the legal limit. Please, this upcoming holiday weekend ... have a designated driver in your posse if you spend time partying.



December 28

The Highlands County Sports complex on Sebring's south side won't be the only fresh-dressed sports facility in the County soon. The City of Avon Park has been awarded grants for some serious renovations at the City's MLK Junior Sports Complex on East State Street. New pavilions, fencing, visitor's bleachers and football and basketball playing surfaces are included in the plans. The \$200,000 state grant will be matched by the city and the County's Recreation and Parks Advisory Committee funds.

How about a nice walk though Highlands Hammock to start the New Year? Park officials are running the "First Day Hikes" again Monday. Two walks are scheduled – one beginning at 9am from the Cypress Swamp Trail through a restricted area park visitors don't generally get to see. A second walk begins on the Loop Road at the mammal kiosk and heads for the historic dam at Little Charley Bowlegs Creek. The walks are free once you've paid your park admission, they're said to be easy walks, but dress for the weather and have long pants on.

A former Hardee County deputy fired back in November for alleged animal abuse at a pet care business he was running on the side, is back in trouble. Nicholas Zotto was arrested last week and charged with aggravated animal abuse. Police say a dog left in his care ended up near death after reportedly being denied water for several days.

And down in Lee County, Sheriff's deputies and wildlife officials responded to a local mall to wrangle a 12-foot alligator caught window-shopping. The Lee County Sheriff's Office said deputies responded to the Coconut Point Mall in Estero when the 600-pound gator was spotted wandering behind the Five Below store.

December 29

The long New Years' weekend begins tonight and your local cops want you to remember that you may be off work, but they aren't. Drive sober this weekend, have a designated driver and enjoy yourself – responsibly. If you're driving, be forewarned – gas is up. The Florida AA says that gas prices in the state jumped on average by 14 cents a gallon last week, as much as anything in response to anticipated demand. Overall, Florida DOES remain a little under a penny a gallon less than the national average, at about \$3.12 a gallon as of yesterday.

If a trip to LEGOLAND up in Winter Haven is in your plans, be aware – the crummy weather prompted the park to decide to close the water park portion of the attraction through Saturday due to the weather forecast.

Law enforcement agencies around this part of the state say that the phone scam game is getting more sophisticated – along with bilking seniors and other trusting souls, the phone crooks are taking advantage of the holiday period to place calls to businesses, telling unsuspecting employees there's an urgent financial matter that can't wait and posing as corporate office personnel or other position of authority. The break between holiday – when lots of managers take time off – makes it more believable, and conned employees are asked to take money out of the till or even their own pockets and transfer the money by gift card or a bitcoin machine to – you guessed it – an account that's overseas and untouchable once it's gone.

You check your credit file regularly – we hope – and keep yourself safe from identity theft. But have you checked your property? Title fraud in Florida has been endemic in South Florida and Highlands County's



Clerk of Courts office is trying to stay ahead of the curve before it moves inland. For a month or so now, the Clerk's office is offering an automated warning system that'll alert you whether someone has recorded a document on your property. The service is free, and may save you some heartache is the coastal scammers notice this is a pretty nice place, too. Log on to [www.highlandsclerkfl.gov](http://www.highlandsclerkfl.gov) and look for the "Property Fraud Alert" tab on the drop down menu, or in the links at the bottom of the page.