

TUESDAY
TODAY & next morning
HIGH **86**
LOW **55**
Sunny and breezy. Cool at night.
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CITRUS COUNTY CHRONICLE



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IN BRIEF

Supervisor of Elections to be at Floral City Library

The Supervisor of Elections office will be holding an outreach event at the Floral City Library from 9-11 a.m. on May 12.

Register to vote, make changes to voter records or request a vote-by-mail ballot. Information to apply for election worker positions will also be available.

Anyone interested in having the elections office staff at an organization or business, contact Supervisor Maureen 'Mo' Baird.

The Floral City Library is located at 8360 E. Orange Ave., Floral City.

To learn more, visit votecitrus.gov, email vote@votecitrus.gov or contact the office at 352-564-7120.

Attend a presentation on navigating Medicare

Navigating Medicare can be difficult without help, but it can be hard to find a trustworthy guide. The Citrus County Library System has partnered with Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders (SHINE) to provide the public with an information presentation.

The upcoming presentation, Medicare Basics: Medicare 101, will be held at the Coastal Region branch in Crystal River on May 10 from 1-2:30 p.m.

SHINE, a program created by the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, is the official, unbiased source of information on all parts of Medicare.

Library programs are free and open to the public. Additional information about SHINE can be found at floridashine.org.

For more information about this presentation, visit their online calendar at attend.citruslibraries.org/events or call the Coastal Region branch at 352-795-3716.

Schlabach to speak to River Alliance

The Homosassa River Alliance will hold its next monthly meeting at 7 p.m. on May 12 at the Old Homosassa Learning Center, 10950 W. Yulee Drive, across from the Homosassa Civic Club.

Commissioner Ruthie Schlabach will be the guest speaker. The public is invited. New residents of the community are welcome to attend to learn of their efforts in continuing to preserve and improve the health of the river.

Florida gasoline prices rise

The average price of a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline in Florida was \$4.21 on Monday, up about three cents from a week earlier, according to the AAA auto club. The average was also up about 12 cents from a month earlier.

Florida reached a record high of \$4.38 a gallon on March 11. The most-expensive gas in Florida is in the West Palm Beach, Gainesville and Fort Lauderdale markets, while the least-expensive gas is in the Pensacola, Punta Gorda, Melbourne and Fort Myers markets, according to AAA.

Chamber takes temperature of its members

Economic development ranked as top issue

By MICHAEL D. BATES
Chronicle Reporter

Each year, the Citrus County Chamber of Commerce conducts a "temperature check" of its 1,000 members, with the purpose

of identifying the top issues of the county and gauging their confidence in the institutions and officials governing them.

The poll results are in and it shows that economic development was overwhelmingly ranked as the most important issue by the 150 participants.

From there, concerns include lack of affordable housing, bad road condi-

tions, costly property insurance, the environment, utility infrastructure, mental health, crime and poverty.

This is the second consecutive year business owners cited the economy as being a problem. Some of the same concerns are still present: inflation, supply chain shortages, access to a qualified workforce and a lack of competent people in the job market.

"There wasn't a big movement on opinions since last year but rather members seemed to have solidified their views," according to

chamber President/CEO Josh Wooten. "It's always important to hear from our

members, especially this being an election year."

While the poll numbers are not scientific, past checks have closely mirrored elections and surveys of local citizens, he said.

Wooten said the poll results will be used to develop questions for its county commissioner political candidate forum on July 8.

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Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

Bruce Titus rides along a new beach mat that Citrus County declared officially open Monday, May 9, at Fort Island Gulf Beach in Crystal River. He makes his way along the mat with his niece Raelyn Smith, 2. The 100-foot section of mat allows mobility-restricted individuals, like those in wheelchairs, easier access to the beach. Titus spearheaded effort to get the mat in place.



Dakota Hodge, 17, and her sister Dreama Hodge, 19, are assisted Monday, May 9, by their parents Troy Gusler and Lisa Jordan, as a new beach mat is ceremonially opened to the public at Fort Island Gulf Beach in Crystal River.

Man's crusade helps make beach more accessible

Installation of mat allows those in a wheelchair to traverse the sand

By NANCY KENNEDY
Chronicle Reporter

Surrounded by family, friends and county staff and officials, Bruce Titus was the man of the hour Monday morning at Fort Island Beach in Crystal River.

With party music playing on the Bumpboxx, blue skies overhead and a cool breeze blowing, he and Citrus County Commissioner Holly Davis cut the blue ribbon, officially opening the 100-foot, wheelchair-accessible, Mobi-mat beach access mat.

Titus, 25, has been in a wheelchair since 2016 after being hit by a car from behind as he rode his bicycle home.

Last fall, he had written an essay for a college English class about the benefits of these beach mats for people in wheelchairs.

As he researched for his assignment, he wondered if it was possible to get one at Citrus County's local beach.

What began as a school assignment turned into a crusade, and Monday was the culmination of his efforts.

"This is amazing," Titus said. "Once I gained the support from everybody, that's when I knew it would happen ... I really enjoyed going to the county commission meetings and being a part of it."

"Last week when we were out here installing the concrete and the mat, I loved seeing the different county departments out here, working together," he said.

"These mats are popping up all over, and it's time that people started waking up. Like I said when I first started this, 'Nobody thinks about how the other guy gets around.'"

Titus wasn't the only one in a wheelchair on Monday.

Lisa Jordan and Troy Gusler had brought teen sisters, Dakota and Dreama Hodge, both in wheelchairs.

"The girls love the water, but until now, the closest we could take them was the boardwalk," Jordan said. "This is great."

Valerie Washburn, who is part of the same spinal cord injury support group as Titus, said she is extremely proud of Titus' hard work.

"Unless people in wheelchairs speak up, we won't be heard," she said. "We're not seen very often."

"For example, I told my son about this and he said, 'How often would you even go to the beach?' I told him, 'It doesn't matter. If I only go once, it's here for me.' This is a good thing," she said.

On behalf of the county, Holly Davis said, "You may have noticed, we're going through a few growing pains here in Citrus County. But I have to say, this event shows our greatest strength, which is our community spirit."

"So, even though we're going through these growing pains, the community spirit brings us forward. We are inclusive; we support each other," she said. "And whenever possible, we always provide access to everyone, especially for a fine amenity like this beach."

Davis went on to call Titus "the embodiment of what a collegial town square spirit is."

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School Board to continue discussion about athletic trainers

By GEORGIA SULLIVAN
Chronicle Reporter

The Citrus County School Board meeting Tuesday, May 10, will feature the approval of Mark Kahler as principal of Citrus High School, as well as presentations of awards for the Florida Retired Educators Association Fifth Grade Essay Contest, National Merit Recognition and the 4-H Public Speaking Contest.

Last month, the Citrus County School Board members discussed the possibility of contracting with the University of Florida Health Orthopedics and Sports Medicine Institute

to hire athletic trainers for students in Citrus County schools. The board members were very interested and on-board with the idea, but wanted to find the best available option concerning price and equitability as well.

At this month's meeting, there will be a presentation by ATvantage Athletic Training with the potential of contracting with them instead.

The school board members and officials will discuss what ATvantage has to offer, the prices of their services and what might

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COURT DIGEST

Man agrees to open plea of 20 years for child-porn collection

By BUSTER THOMPSON
Chronicle Reporter

A Floral City man who was facing a little more than 250 years behind bars for his collection of illegal pornography accepted a plea deal to keep his punishment capped at 20 years.

In exchange for Citrus County Circuit Court Judge Richard Howard's open-plea offer, 37-year-old Patrick James Crocker pleaded

no contest Monday, May 9, to 17 counts of possessing 10 or more images of child pornography.

Howard will sentence Crocker June 13 to up to 20 years in prison, after he reviews the pre-sentence investigation report on Crocker's background, and considers arguments from Assistant State Attorney Blake Shore and Crocker's lawyer, Joshua Houston.

Crocker was due to stand trial this week, and a conviction as charged would have pitted him against an original sentencing threshold of between 19 and 255 years in prison for his 17 second-degree felonies.

A prison term less than 19 years from Howard will be a downward departure from Crocker's sentencing guidelines.

Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) authorities arrested Crocker Nov. 19, 2020, as a result of FDLE Special Agent Dodi Pruitt's undercover investigation to identify distributors of child pornography on the internet.

Using peer-to-peer sharing software, Pruitt downloaded four illicit files between Sept. 15 and Oct. 12, 2020, from an IP address associated with Crocker's

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