



## IN BRIEF

### Vehicle collides with school bus

A vehicle collided with a Citrus County School District bus returning students home from school. Of the 21 Citrus Springs Middle School students riding the bus during the crash the afternoon of Tuesday, March 1, in Hernando, one reported minor injuries, school district spokeswoman Lindsay Blair said, adding the bus driver was also uninjured. According to Florida Highway Patrol (FHP), the bus was northbound on North Annapolis Avenue and passing through the intersection with County Road 486 when a white Toyota Venza traveling east on C.R. 486 ran the junction's red light and struck the left side of the bus.

FHP reported the 33-year-old Hernando man driving the Toyota suffered incapacitating injuries, and was airlifted to Ocala Regional Medical Center for treatment. A 4-year-old Hernando boy riding as a passenger in the Toyota suffered possible injuries but first responders did not take him to hospital, according to FHP.

### Floral City Strawberry Festival this weekend

The 35th annual Floral City Strawberry Festival will be held on March 5 and 6 this year in Floral Park, Floral City.

Live music will be played from the main stage with a full performance lineup. Saturday will begin with Southern Express Band from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., followed by headliner Xhale from 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday's lineup includes Lonesome Ride from 10 a.m. to noon with headliner Rick Lynn and Clint Byron closing out the festival from 1 to 4 p.m.

All the favorite events will be back this year as well, including the pie eating contests and prince and princess pageants.

Festival hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday. Entrance fee is \$5 for adults, children 12 and under are free. Free parking is available at the Citrus County Auditorium, 3610 S. Florida Ave., Inverness. Free shuttles will be provided.

For more information, visit GoStrawberryFest.com or search "Floral City Strawberry Festival" on Facebook.

### Hernando/Citrus MPO to meet

The Hernando/Citrus Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) will hold a public meeting at 1:30 p.m. March 3 at the Brooksville City Hall council chambers, 201 Howell Ave.

The following items have been posted at hernandocitrusmpo.us for a 10-day public review period:

- Amendment to the 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan to include extension of Suncoast Parkway 2 (County Road 486 to County Road 495 and C.R. 495 to U.S. 19)
- Amendment to the FY 2022-26 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) to include design funding for extension of Suncoast Parkway 2

See BRIEF, page A5

## Biden gives State of the Union address

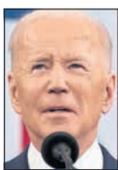
### President vows to check Russian aggression

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Addressing a concerned nation and anxious world, President Joe Biden vowed in his first State of the Union address Tuesday night to check Russian aggression in Ukraine, tame soaring U.S. inflation and deal with the fading but still dangerous coronavirus.

Biden declared that he and all members of Congress, whatever their political differences, are joined "with an unwavering resolve that freedom will always triumph over tyranny." He asked the lawmakers crowding the House chamber to stand and salute the Ukrainians as he began his speech. They stood and cheered.

It was a notable show of unity after a long year of bitter acrimony between Biden's Democratic coalition and the Republican opposition.



BIDEN

Biden's speech — split between attention to war abroad and considerable domestic worries — reflected the same balancing act he now faces in his presidency. He must marshal allied resolve against Russia's aggression while tending to inflation, COVID-19 fatigue and sagging approval ratings heading into the midterm elections.

Biden highlighted the bravery of Ukrainian defenders and the commitment of a newly reinvigorated Western alliance that has worked to rearm the Ukrainian military and cripple Russia's economy through

sanctions. He warned of costs to the American economy, as well, but warned ominously that without consequences, Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression wouldn't be contained to Ukraine.

"Throughout our history we've learned this lesson — when dictators do not pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos," Biden said. "They keep moving. And, the costs and threats to America and the world keep rising."

As Biden spoke, Russian forces were escalating their attacks in

See BIDEN, page A6

## CREST paraprofessional stands by his students

### Nick Catto: District School-Related Employee of the Year

By HANNAH SACHEWICZ  
Chronicle Reporter

Exceptional students deserve exceptional teachers and staff. As a paraprofessional at Citrus Resources for Exceptional Students in Transition (CREST), Nick Catto is just that.

Catto has worked for six years in his current position and most recently, he was selected as the Citrus County School District's School-Related Employee of the Year (SREY) at January's Galaxy of Stars event.

At CREST, Catto works exclusively with students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD) and intellectual disabilities (InD). "When Nick first started working at CREST, he worked with EBD high school students," CREST principal Lee Mulder wrote in her SREY nomination letter. "From the beginning, Nick was able to use his honest talk and charisma to influence his groups for good."

Catto himself went through the Citrus County School System. At Citrus High School, one of his history teachers encouraged him to pursue a career in education. At 24 years old, he made the jump.

"I originally went to college for it," Catto said about his associate's in early childhood education. He's also a Registered Behavior Technician and is trained in Crisis Prevention Intervention.

Now 30, Catto has six years of experience under his belt. Typically, paraprofessionals work alongside a teacher. Due to his knowledge and success with students, Catto now works solo.

Currently, he has one student, 15-year-old Trevion



Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

Citrus Resource for Exceptional Students in Transition paraprofessional Nick Catto visits with 15-year-old CREST School student Trevion Watkins on Tuesday, March 1. Catto was recent named the Citrus County School District Support Related Employee of the Year.



Nick Catto, a paraprofessional with the Citrus County School District, touches hands with 15-year-old Trevion Watkins at the CREST School. Catto says that the two will repeat the touch, sometimes dozens of times each day, and it is a way for him to gauge the teen's stress level.

Watkins. After Catto gets Watkins off the bus and they eat breakfast, "I pretty much have to gauge how he's feeling," he said. Typically, the pair work on ABC Mouse, where they practice lessons

such as colors and numbers on the interactive program.

Catto also utilizes the Seesaw program for students, which allows educators to upload worksheets to students' iPads. Next, of

course, is lunch. Afterwards is some playground time or more schoolwork, depending on how Watkins is feeling.

At approximately 1:45 p.m., it's time for Wat-

kins to go home. However, Catto's workday extends beyond the classroom. "I get on the bus with him," he said.

Unlike many traditional teachers, Catto can have years of one-on-one time with his students. "A lot of kids I work with — it's really hard to build relationships with them," he said. "They're really hesitant to trust people, so they lash out sometimes."

However, Catto said students have been receptive to his methods. "Usually they come around." Once they do, a strong bond is formed.

Although the schoolwork is important, Catto said, it's equally as important to teach his students how to express their emotions in a healthy way. "That's gonna be one of the things that

See CATTO, page A5

## Russian invasion could send gas prices soaring

By MICHAEL D. BATES  
Chronicle Reporter

Florida gas prices increased 4 cents last week and more pump price hikes could be on the way.

Crude oil prices have surged amid growing concerns that the Russia invasion of Ukraine could impact global crude supplies, according to AAA.

Russia is the third-largest oil producing country in the world and the crude oil market was already tight before this conflict began.

Floridians are paying an average price of \$3.52 per gallon. That's the most expensive daily average since July 2014. Florida gas prices have risen an average of

33 cents per gallon since the beginning of 2022, and \$1.33 per gallon since the beginning of 2021.

Last week, oil prices spiked when Russia invaded Ukraine. However, prices quickly retreated to previous levels after President Joe Biden announced sanctions that didn't specifically target Russian oil.

But oil prices shot up Sunday night, when international trading began and, as of Monday, the U.S. price of oil was trading above \$96 per barrel — an increase of about \$5 from Friday.

"Unless oil prices reverse course, the pain at the pump is about to get even worse

See GAS, page A5

## Hospital board to negotiate land sale

### Company that builds hotels interested in Crystal River lots

By FRED HIERS  
Chronicle Reporter

Trustees of the Citrus County Hospital Board will meet Friday as part of negotiations to sell 5.4 acres along State Road 44 in Crystal River.

The hospital board posted the two wooded lots for sale for the past two years but received minimal interest from buyers, until now. The lots are bordered by Northeast 12th Avenue to the east and Northeast 11th Avenue to the west.

Maverick, the Orlando-based company which builds and operates hotels, is offering \$450,000 for the two properties. Inverness Realtor Jim Morton told the trustees last week that the company has been looking for several months throughout Citrus County for potential locations for this project and others.

The hospital board owns Citrus Memo-

rial Hospital on behalf of the public and leases the hospital, as well as affiliated properties, to Hospital Corporation of America. The two vacant lots at issue are not part of the lease with HCA.

Morton reminded the trustees during their board meeting last week that the potential buyer would still have to make a request to the Crystal River Council for zoning changes to accommodate a hotel/motel, and that would take time.

Trustees will have to decide how much time to give the developer to get its zoning changes and close the deal, during which time the properties would be off the market.

During discussions last week trustees agreed to offer the potential buyer 360 days to get the zoning change, but would ask for a deposit of \$50,000 that the hospital board would keep if the developer could not get the zoning change and the deals fell through.

In addition, any information that's

See HOSPITAL, page A5

