

HAPPY
NEW YEAR!



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YOUR HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER SINCE 1919

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YEAR IN REVIEW - A look back at 2019



2019 TOP TEN STORIES

Too hot to handle McCall injured in propane fire

By KIM LEATHERMAN
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Explosions were heard for miles from the fire that raged through the Kosan Crisplant Inc. propane gas tank plant at 11850 Twitty Road on the afternoon of April 29. One employee, Wayne McCall was burned and flown to Tampa General

TOP TEN #2

Hospital. McCall was the only person in the building at the time the fire started. McCall may have saved lives near the plant as he was able to shut off the main valve before the fire reached the big propane tank. The plant refurbished and refilled propane

PROPANE | 8A



KIM LEATHERMAN/STAFF
Fire tore through a propane facility on April 29 in Sebring. One person was injured.

Highlands County had a sad start to the year when shock and grief swept over us following the senseless killing of five women at a SunTrust Bank branch in Sebring. Then a Sebring man was badly burned in a large propane facility fire. He was credited for saving the lives of those who lived in the area when he shut off the main valve before the fire reached the larger propane tank

outside. As we begin 2020, residents wait for the opening of three Wawa convenience stores, and a Nucor Steel mill north of Avon Park. The list was compiled after an informal vote by Highlands News-Sun staff, who ranked the story list based on the impact it hand and its headline-grabbing news value. Many of these stories will continue to be revisited again this year.

Sebring has a mass shooting

Five local women killed in bank attack

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — January 23, 2019, a typical Wednesday, didn't end like one.

On that day, Sebring unwillingly joined an ever-growing group of American communities that have suffered mass shootings.

At 12:36 p.m. Jan. 23, the Sebring Police Department, Highlands County Sheriff's Office, Sebring Fire Department and Highlands County Fire Rescue responded to SunTrust bank at U.S. 27 and Tubbs Road. A man inside the bank had called 911, saying he had fired shots in the building.

Zephen Allen Xaver, 21, had shot and killed four bank employees — 54-year-old Debra Cook, 55-year-old Marisol Lopez (Rosado-Carmona), 31-year-old Jessica Eileen Noreen Montague and 38-year-old Ana Maria Piñon-Williams — and a customer, 65-year-old Cynthia Lee Watson.

Through the 911 call, Sebring Police



PHIL ATTINGER/STAFF

Sebring Police Department and Highlands County Sheriff's Office personnel stage in preparation to either draw out a gunman at SunTrust bank in Sebring, or to go in after Zephen Allen Xaver, 21, who had called from inside the bank, claiming he had shot people.

Chief Karl Hoglund tried to get the shooter to surrender, but eventually gave word for the Sheriff's Office Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team to enter the building.

They arrested the shooter, who had a 9mm handgun.

U.S. 27 had been shut down from Lakeview Drive to Golfview Road.

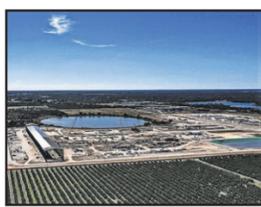
BANK | 8A

Construction starts Nucor Steel to open mill in July 2020

By MARC VALERO
STAFF WRITER

AVON PARK — In April, Nucor Steel Florida broke ground on constructing a mill that will produce some 350,000 tons of steel rebar a year and employ a workforce of 250 with average annual salaries of \$66,000.

It is located just north of the county line in Polk County and just east of U.S. 27, but it should have a big impact on Highlands County and Avon Park in particular.



COURTESY PHOTO

The Nucor Steel mill plant under construction north of Avon Park.

Work is underway to extend the City of Avon Park's water and sewer lines to provide service to Nucor. It was recently reported by the city that 30% of the project is complete.

The City Council will likely vote in January on

MILL | 8A

Duke brings the power of the sun to LP

By KIM LEATHERMAN
STAFF WRITER

LAKE PLACID — It's official. Duke Energy Florida's solar farm in Lake Placid is up and running.

TOP TEN #4

Duke Energy originally said it would have the project producing power by December 2019. They have reached their goals, according to Duke Energy's spokeswoman Ana Gibbs, the company has been "in service" since Dec. 9.

The 380-acre solar plant can be seen off the east shoulder of U.S. 27; the farm is just north of Southern Lifestyle Assisted Living Center and across from



COURTESY PHOTO/DUKE ENERGY FLORIDA

A drone's eye view of the completed Duke Energy Florida solar plant project.

Tomoka Heights. The sun's power is harnessed by 180,000 tracking solar panels. Duke has a long term lease with

the landowners who are members of the Smoak family. EDF Renewables originated the project

with the intent of selling power to Duke Energy Florida. They found the location and applied to

POWER | 8A

Olds Jr. dies from dog bites; dogs euthanized

By KIM LEATHERMAN
STAFF WRITER

LAKE PLAICD — Normally a day filled with friends, cookouts and fireworks, the Fourth of July will never be the same for the family of Melvin Olds Jr. The 45-year-old man was found dead in a wooded area behind a home on Cochran Drive in the

Highway Park subdivision just before noon on the patriotic day.

Olds was seen alive just hours before his body was found. By Friday afternoon, Dr. Stephen Nelson, District 10 Medical Examiner, determined through an autopsy that the preliminary cause of death was from over 100 dog bites

on Olds' body.

According to Lt. Clay Kinslow of Highlands County Animal Services said he and his deputies found the four pitbull mix dogs they thought were responsible. The dogs were captured and sedated. Measurements

TOP TEN #5

were taken of their teeth and and DNA was collected from the animals. The owner of the dogs, an elderly woman, was found and she surrendered her dogs to animal services.

"DNA came back from one of the dogs," Kinslow

said. "The other three dogs couldn't be ruled because their DNA was so close."

Kinslow said inbreeding was the reason the DNA was so close between the four dogs. Therefore all the dogs were euthanized on July 15. The former owner told Animal Control she did not want aggressive dogs in her home.

Since the incident, Kinslow said there has not been a big issue with aggressive animals in the subdivision. He also said people seem to be keeping their animals inside more.

Animal Control can be reached Monday through Friday at 863-402-6730; at night or during weekends, call 863-402-7200.



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Good morning To
2020
Thanks for reading!



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