

## AP, Sebring receive state infrastructure grants

By **MARC VALERO**  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Governor Ron DeSantis's announcement Thursday of the awarding of nearly \$150 million to Florida communities for more resilient infrastructure brings a total of nearly \$6.8 million to two Highlands County cities. DeSantis announced

that more than \$148 million has been awarded to communities through the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity's (DEO) Rebuild Florida Mitigation General Infrastructure Program. The program, administered by DEO, allows local governments to develop large-scale infrastructure projects to make communities more resilient to

future disasters. The City of Sebring receives \$2,605,428 to complete fire protection resiliency, water quality and water conservation infrastructure improvements. Also, the City of Sebring will receive \$3,515,580 to harden facilities that are part of the city's sanitary sewer collection system. The City of Avon Park

receives \$670,623 to improve the existing potable water system through replacement of asbestos pipes with PVC piping, adding additional bore to improve water pressure and to install an upgraded chlorine system. Avon Park City Manager Mark Schrader said the city applied for three infrastructure grants last year. Contact from the



SCHRADER

Highlands News-Sun was the first that he heard this grant has been awarded.

"We had made it from one phase to the next, but we didn't know it was actually awarded to us yet," he said.

"My administration remains committed to providing the resources necessary for Florida communities to build back stronger and be more resilient to future storms," said DeSantis, who was speaking in Lakeland at the Lake Bonnet project. "This transformational

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## State sees 35K COVID deaths

By **KIM MOODY**  
STAFF WRITER

Highlands County saw another two deaths attributed to COVID-19 on Friday's Florida Department of Health's daily coronavirus update. The overall deaths in the county have now risen to 334 people.

The new cases went down to 30 on Friday but still elevated from last week's single digits. The new cases overnight brought the cumulative total to 8,054. All 30 new positive cases were from residents. There have been 7,963 residents and 91 non-residents who have been infected with the virus.

On Thursday, there were 395 tests processed with 364 negative results for a 7.85% positivity rate on Friday's report. The positivity rate was down a tick from the day before but testing was also down.

The daily median age of those infected was 39 and the overall average age is still 51 years old.

Hospitalizations rose to 635 admissions, with two more added overnight. The Agency for Health Care Administration reported 36 people being treated primarily for COVID on Friday afternoon. Across the state, there were 3,263 people hospitalized due to the virus.

Long-term care facilities have had 696 cases, only one more than the previous day. FDOH shows 88 deaths from either residents or staff from long-term care facilities. That is an increase of three people overnight.

Corrections cases remains at 127 infections.

Moderna vaccines are still being given by the Highlands County Board of County Commission at the former JC Penney in Lakeshore Mall, Wednesday through Saturday.

Appointments only for first and second dose from 8-11 a.m.

Walk-ins for first dose from 1-4 p.m. subject to daily availability.

Walk-ins for second dose from 1-3 p.m. subject to daily availability.

For first doses, use the entrance closest to Planet Fitness. For second doses, use the entrance closest to the former Kmart store.

Across the state, new cases rose by 7,296 infections. The total infections since the start of the pandemic are 2,155,744. Residents still make up the majority of the new cases with 2,115,191 cases compared to non-residents with 40,553 cases.

Deaths rose by 93 people overnight, including one non-resident. Florida reached 35,000 deaths on Friday, including non-residents. Deaths are divided by residents with 34,330 people and 670 non-residents.

Florida processed 106,502 tests with 99,226 negative results. The state's positivity rate was 6.83%.

Numbers in the United States remained pretty stable, with states reporting 71,229 new cases, while deaths climbed slightly up to 943. There was a slight dip in hospitalizations, with 40,997 currently hospitalized and 8,002 in ICU.

The U.S. continues to march towards having half of all adults with at least one vaccine dose. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the country has seen 49.1% of adults 18 and over receiving at least one shot and 31.1% of the people having received both doses.

Among seniors, 80.4% have received at least one shot, while 64.6% have been fully vaccinated.

According to the Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and

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## Heroes behind the headsets



KIM MOODY/STAFF

One pod of dispatchers smiled for the camera on Thursday during National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week. From left they are Lawanda Thompson, Austin Taylor, Crystal McGann and Mauri Wise.

### Celebrating National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week

By **KIM MOODY**  
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Highlands County salutes the first of the first responders during National Public Safety Telecommunicators Week from April 11-17. Annually, the second week in April, dispatchers are celebrated for the professionalism and passion they bring to their careers.

Dispatchers are considered the gold line that stands between scared callers and the help they need such as firefighters, law enforcement and Emergency Medical Services. The dispatcher on the other end of the phone line can mean the difference between life and death, literally. Consolidated dispatchers that serve Highlands County have walked people through CPR on the phone as well as talked people through baby deliveries. They have literally answered the (911) calling to be the catalyst to help those in need.

"You either like this job or you don't," Director of Dispatch Shane Smith said. "It takes a certain person.

Dispatch Training Coordinator Crystal McGann, who was recently promoted from shift supervisor, said calls dealing with children are always the hardest.

"Children's calls are just ... they're helpless," McGann said. "We're here to help. The bad outcome on those is always the hardest to deal with."

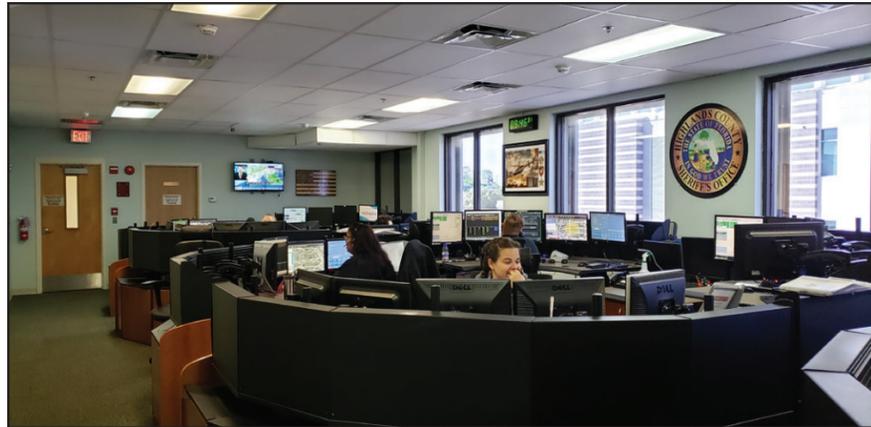
Smith said the dispatchers don't always get to know how the calls turn out, so there is not always closure from a call.

Currently Consolidated Dispatch has 22 full-time dispatchers, one part-time dispatcher and two temporary people. Highlands County Sheriff's Office is



KIM MOODY/STAFF

On left Mauri Wise with her friend and colleague, Nikole Cedeno-Mojica, sit under the HCSO dispatcher's office mural that artist Keith Goodson painted a few years ago.



KIM MOODY/STAFF

### A look into Consolidated Dispatch office.

seeking to hire six more dispatchers. Ideally, Smith said, they would be operating with 32 dispatchers including shift supervisors.

"Our dispatchers are very good," Smith said. "We deal with a lot of in-progress stuff and stuff that's happening right now and they jump to it and they get the job done."

She explained why she wanted to be a 911 dispatcher many years ago, starting off in the Avon Park Police Department.

"I think I just enjoy helping people," she said as opposed to being an EMT. "I don't want to be out there doing it. Back here, I am

still creating a difference because I am still getting help to them. We're talking them through CPR. We're talking them through how to control bleeding until someone else gets there and can take over. We're still here; we're still talking them through. We talk to people at the worst of times. I don't want to see blood, so I am not going to be an EMS person."

Smith did admit that being in the same room with the calls for 12 hours can be difficult. McGann said as a shift supervisor, she would let a dispatcher who had a rough call to go and take a break to decompress.

"Every shift supervisor does things a little different based on who you are working with," McGann said. "Everyone in there has a different personality and they handle things a little differently."

On extremely difficult shifts, the entire room can be relieved with a replacement team. They also have a Crisis Incident Stress Management (CISM) team with time to talk to others involved and the discussion does not leave the room. The CISM is relatively new. Before, they were using a team out of Polk County.

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Good morning To  
Emily Bootier  
Thanks for reading!

