

County calls out Waste Connections Hauler named 'habitual violator'; appeals declaration

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — County Administrator Randy Vosburg has called out Waste Connections LLC as a 'habitual violator' of its contract with the county.

The garbage and recycling hauler's legal counsel has asked for a hearing to appeal that declaration, and the Board of County Commission has obliged. Commissioners will hear arguments during the next regular meeting on June 1.

In a letter to the company on May 7, Vosburg said he'd reviewed documents from the Engineering Department about the company's activities, and found that the company had defaulted often and regularly on conditions of its franchise agreement with the county. Under Section 13.4 of the agreement, he said, those actions constituted a "condition of irredeemable default."

In all caps, he then wrote, "Please govern yourself accordingly."

In a page-and-a-half response letter, Waste

Connections' attorney Grant J. Smith strongly disagreed with the declaration, stating that the county had no history of default on which to base the decision, and if there had, that the county should have served the company with notices of default, as required under Sections 12 and 13.2(g) of the contract.

He said company officials deserve to know what specific grievances the county has, and is prepared to discuss these issues, but has no paper-trail of

GARBAGE | 4A

Highlands County COVID report good

By KIM MOODY
STAFF WRITER

Highlands County coronavirus numbers remained steady on Tuesday. The Florida Health Department's report showed low numbers across the board when its daily COVID-19 report was released.

For the second day in a row, there were only 10 new cases of infection. All of those cases were from residents. Those cases brought the county's total to 8,685. The cases are divided by 8,588 residents and 97 non-residents.

There were no new deaths and they remain at 361.

The county processed 180 tests with 170 negative results. The positivity rate was 5.56%, down quite a bit from Monday's rate of 8.77%.

Hospitalizations were 670 on Tuesday afternoon, up two admissions from Monday. The Agency for Health Care Administration showed 18 people were hospitalized with COVID. Florida had 2,345 people hospitalized, which is down by nearly 100 since the previous day.

Florida has had an increase of 2,805 coronavirus cases overnight; that is up by 829 infections from Monday. The cumulative infection total is 2,296,785. Of those cases, 2,253,896 are from residents and 42,889 were from non-residents.

Deaths were up considerably across the state at 97, including three residents. Deaths have reached 36,954. The breakdown of deaths are 36,227 residents and 727 non-residents who have died from COVID.

Testing was up throughout the state with 61,238 tests processed, of which 58,447 had negative results. The tests produced a positivity rate of 4.56%.

COVID numbers across the U.S. are continuing to fall as there were 71,132 new cases reported between Saturday and Monday. With the number of states not reporting on weekends, daily counts for Saturday and Sunday have become incomplete. That was 17,672 fewer cases than were reported last Saturday through Monday.

UPDATE | 4A



COURTESY/

Court hearings continue regarding the death of Mercedes Blair in October 2014. The accused and charged person, James Ivan Sanders, is scheduled to be back in the courtroom today.

Justice for Mercedes



Seven years later, Carolina and Tim Hall continue to await justice for the death of their granddaughter, Mercedes Blair. Another hearing is set for today for James Ivan Sanders, the suspect in Mercedes' death.

Family waits for day in court 7 years later

By JOHN L. GUERRA
CORRESPONDENT

SEBRING — The wheels of justice are turning too slowly for Carolina Hall, whose granddaughter — Mercedes Blair — was allegedly beaten to death by an adult.



SANDERS

"The case has dragged on way too long, too many excuses," said Hall, who raised the youngster since the child was 8 months old. "I think we're the longest-lasting murder case in Highlands County."

It's been nearly seven years since Mercedes, 4, died from a disfiguring skull fracture and internal

injuries. In the hours before the child died, a doctor at Highlands Regional Medical Center noted bruising on nearly every part of the youngster's body, as well as blunt force trauma to her liver and kidneys.

On Oct. 14, 2014, Highlands County Sheriff's Office deputies arrested James Ivan Sanders, a 28-year-old lawn care employee. According to the arrest affidavit, the child's mother, Geisy Alvarez, had left Mercedes in Sanders' care while she went to work. Sanders — who had taken Alvarez and the child into his home two weeks earlier — told hospital staff the child had tripped and hit her head on the floor. He also said he had found the child passed out on the

ground outside the mobile home.

When police didn't buy Sanders' explanation for the child's injuries, they charged him with aggravated child abuse and first degree murder.

Hall — and her husband Tim Hall — long for justice for the little girl who called them "Nana" and "Papa." Mercedes' father, Bryce Blair, who is Carolina's son, has taken his call for justice to Change.org, the online site where people can gather signatures for a cause.

"The State Attorney's Office has been dragging its feet," Hall says. "The fact that Sanders' lawyer gets continuance after continuance ... Bryce boils about this case, trust me."

The Halls may have a

point. Though the average Florida felony case lasts about 180 days, Florida v. Sanders — with more than 62 court events and 375 motions, memorandum and other filings since Sanders' arraignment — has lasted much longer.

"This should have been resolved a long time ago," Carolina Hall said.

Though a pre-trial conference is set for today, it will probably lead to another continuance, said Steve Houchin, Highlands County assistant state attorney. In fact, he agrees that several cases in his office are taking longer than he'd like. But judges, hoping to avoid being overturned on appeal, allow defendants a lot of continuances. Prosecutors

MERCEDES | 4A

Part of Parkway ready for traffic Friday Next phase will include roundabout at HRMC



COURTESY PHOTO/HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSION

Southbound motorists on Sebring Parkway pass by DeSoto Road where the county has just finished improving the intersection, including installing new signal mast arms. Two-way traffic from DeSoto Road to Youth Care Lane is set to reopen Friday.

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — If you've avoided Sebring Parkway between DeSoto Road and Youth Care Lane, that section will reopen for both directions this Friday.

Highlands County officials reported Tuesday that work is on track for reopening this week. It will stay a two-lane road, however, while work crews continue to work on the outside lanes of what will be a four-lane divided roadway.

Traffic heading south will use the existing southbound lane from the original roadway.

Northbound motorists will use the inside lane of the new lanes, staying out of the outside lane until reaching the right-hand turn lane at Youth Care Lane.

The outside northbound lane will stay closed while work crews build the sidewalk and embankment. Access to businesses at and near Youth Care Lane will remain open from both directions.

As part of the project, the county has removed the span wires at DeSoto Road and replaced them with steel mast arms, as required by the Florida Department of Transportation

with any major intersection expansions or improvements.

Highlands County has a contract with Bergeron Land Development Inc. of Fort Lauderdale to finish Phase 2, the last section of the Sebring Parkway system. The contract runs into 2023, but Highlands County Engineer Clinton Howerton Jr. has said he doesn't think it will take that long.

Highlands County's Public Information Office reported work started Oct. 5, 2020, and Tuesday was contract day 226,

PARKWAY | 4A



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Good morning To
Carmen Bones
Thanks for reading!

