



COURTESY PHOTO/BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSION

Michelle Gresham of Avon Park argues the need for a mandatory mask ordinance Tuesday night in front of the Board of County Commission. Since Tuesday's meeting was a budget workshop, commissioners said they would discuss the matter at their regular 9 a.m. meeting next Tuesday.

Mandatory masks?

Board of County Commission agree to discuss it

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Next Tuesday, Highlands County commissioners will discuss whether or not to require cloth face masks in certain situations in the county.

"Why did we have to have a special resolution on the Second Amendment and not on masks?" Michelle Gresham asked commissioners Tuesday

night. "We had a big resolution to support the Second Amendment with the county all in an uproar, but we can't have one for masks?"

Gresham said she had a petition signed by nearly 400

More Coverage

Avon Park City Council discusses the issue of masks at its recent council meeting. Leaves final decision to individual decisions. See page A2.

people in Highlands County who want to see a mask mandate and better testing and contact tracing.

County Attorney Joy Carmichael answered that the county has approved a resolution for the COVID-19

pandemic that says the county will go along with what Gov. Ron DeSantis has outlined for the state.

DeSantis said at the end of June that he would not make face masks mandatory across the state, arguing that putting criminal penalties on failure to comply would probably backfire. At the same time, he said he wouldn't stand in the

MASKS | 7A



COURTESY PHOTO/TLP

AdventHealth Lake Placid has donated a lot of land for the town's firehouse for Highlands County Fire Rescue. This aerial map shows the location near the hospital.

LP firehouse plans could be stalled

By KIM MOODY
STAFF WRITER

LAKE PLACID — The past few years, the Town of Murals has been talking about relocating its fire department (originally volunteers) to a better facility. The new Highlands County firehouse/EMT building will house a paid staff 24/7.

In the past, different locations have been suggested for the new fire department. The last likely spot was located behind Publix on Hillcrest Avenue off of Dal Hall Boulevard. This lot of land has fallen from favor for a laundry list of reasons. The new and highly-favored lot is on Southwest Vista Drive, which is accessible from U.S. 27 to the north and Lake June Road to the south. The 2.44-acre property is being donated by AdventHealth to the town for the purpose of the new firehouse.

Council members said during Monday night's meeting that they are hopeful a traffic light would follow after the firehouse was installed. The light would probably be at the Vista Drive/U.S. 27 intersection with St. John's Street across the street to also benefit. Councilwoman Debra Worley said she is hopeful that a light would be put in at the intersection. She also said the intersection would eventually be a major one because of future plans.

Councilman Ray Royce made it clear if the firehouse was built on Vista Drive there was no guarantee of a light right away. He did agree with Worley that there will eventually be more businesses and perhaps a commerce park in the area. A stop light through Department of Transportation would run several hundred thousand dollars, he said.

"I think there will eventually be a light there," Royce said. "There is a whole bunch of stuff that makes that area attractive."

During the meeting, the council approved the land for Lake Placid land use/semi public as well as rezoning the property to support a firehouse. However, the council's own planning rules may sideline the project before it even gets off the ground.

There were two main objections to the firehouse and/or its site. The



ARTIST RENDERING

This rendering shows a firehouse with three bays. According to Highlands County Planning Supervisor Joedene Thayer the actual building would be four bays.

smaller offense was a proposed 10-foot signage while everyone else has to stick to a 6-foot sign. That was dealt with easily enough with a motion by Royce.

The major hurdle of the night was the proposed building would be compromised of 25% metal. Metal is not currently welcomed in the Caladium Capital of the World. The current land development regulations, LDR, only allow for 10% metal. Worley was adamant that the building would have to have another "skin." She said it was not fair that other business owners are told they cannot have a metal building so the government should not be allowed to do so. Worley said, as a real estate agent, she has to tell people they have to finish their exteriors almost daily.

"I agree; we have had that same standard for a long time," Councilman Greg Sapp said. "Even industrial areas, it doesn't make sense to let it go here since it's not fair to the rest that had to go that route."

The (25%) metal building is considerably cheaper to build. Royce said he has heard the current concept would be \$200,000 cheaper to build than if the county had to finish the exterior. Royce said he understood the LDRs but given the site's location, perhaps it could be allowed in order to get a 24/7 staffed fire station.

"I just want you all to understand, that if we hold them to the siding issue, that could be determining factor that there is not a new fire department/EMS station built in town," Royce told the council. "So, as long as we are willing

to do that, and without that station, then the current facility we have does not have the capability to house 24/7 personnel. What the county will do is staff that personnel elsewhere."

Royce said he felt it was more important to have a 24/7 staffed fire house in the area than siding and said it was a trade-off.

Sapp said it was probably time to look at building rules. Royce said anyone building could apply with the plan development process for what they want to do.

Worley said the council should not be pressured and Lake Placid has standards and everyone knows it.

Town Attorney Bert J. Harris III suggested the county commissioners come down and see if some kind of compromise could be reached through conversations. Perhaps the town could sell the location the current station 36 is in and give the county some funds. Mayor John Holbrook said it was premature to talk of selling the current building because they don't know how fast it will sell and for how much.

Highlands County Fire Chief Marc Bashoor said Tuesday he would love to have a grand firehouse, but that's unrealistic with the budget the county has.

"Historically, the county built small and efficiently as possible with little thought about 24/7 occupation," he said. "I don't care if it's made of Legos as long as it's hurricane compliant and the function serves the people working there."

Florida's virus death toll increases 156 in single day

By MARC VALERO
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — A record of 156 deaths in a day from COVID-19 has pushed the Florida death toll from the virus to 4,677 while 13,965 new cases brings the statewide total to 315,775, according to Thursday's report from the Florida Department of Health.

Highlands County added 28 new cases for a total of 656. The number of those who are currently hospitalized due to the virus increased from 54 on Wednesday to 64 on Thursday. The number of virus deaths remains at 13 in Highlands.

The majority of the county's cases over the course of the pandemic have been in three zip codes — 220 cases in 33870 (Sebring), 211 cases in 33825 (Avon Park) and 83 in 33852 (Lake Placid).

The median age of the Highlands County cases is 47 while the statewide median age of virus cases is 39.

Among those who have been tested for COVID-19, Highlands continues to have a low percentage (5.6%) who test positive. Statewide, the positive rate 11.2%.

Some of the highest positive testing rates are in the Heartland with Glades at 26.4%, Hendry at 19.9%, Hardee at 18.4% and DeSoto at 13.9%.

Miami-Dade County has a positive COVID-19 testing rate of 16.3%.

UPDATE | 7A

Former Commissioner Claude Howerton passes away

Special to the Highlands News-Sun
PROVIDED BY HIGHLANDS COUNTY BOCC

SEBRING — Claude Franklin "C.F." Howerton passed away Thursday morning, July 16, 2020 at the age of 95. Howerton served as a Highlands County commissioner from 1982-1989.

"On behalf of the board of county commissioners, we are saddened by the news of the passing of Claude Howerton," Ron Handley, chair of the Highlands County Board of County

Commission, said. "Claude was well respected within the community and I have known him my entire adult life. I knew him to be a kind and fair person and someone who always had the best interest of Highlands County at heart," Handley said. "My condolences go to his family, his four children and his grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

Howerton was born April 16, 1925 in a house in Dover, and raised in Turkey

HOWERTON | 7A



Classifieds..... B3-6 Obituaries..... A7 TV Listings A9
Comics B7-10 Sports B1 Viewpoints A6
Lottery A2 Weather..... A10

Good morning To
P. Connelly
Thanks for reading!



facebook.com/newssun

twitter.com/TheNewsSun