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State minimum wage battle heating up



WILFREDO LEE/AP FILE PHOTO

Lorenzo Borghese, founder of South Beach Brewing Company, poses for a photo, Thursday, July 23, 2020, in Miami Beach. The Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association is opposed to Amendment 2, which will raise the minimum wage in the state to \$15 an hour by 2026.

By ALLEN MOODY
HIGHLANDS SUN EDITOR

While most of the attention on November's election is focused on the presidential race, it's far from being the only hotly contested race on the ballot. There's a battle starting to brew over Amendment 2, the constitutional amendment that will raise Florida's minimum wage to \$15 an

hour over a period of six years.

If the amendment passes, the state's minimum wage will increase from its current \$8.56 an hour to \$10 on Sept. 30, 2021 and go up \$1 an hour each year until it hits \$15 on Sept. 30, 2026.

Orlando attorney John Morgan — the man instrumental in getting medical marijuana laws on the books in 2016 — is

leading the charge behind the amendment and he feels confident about its chances in November. It's hard to blame him, as the most recent Monmouth University poll showed 67% of registered Florida voters support the amendment. Only 26% of respondents said they plan to vote against it.

"Today, I am proud to stand alongside my fellow compassionate Floridians

who believe, as I do, that their neighbors deserve the dignity of a living wage," Morgan said in a press release.

Morgan isn't afraid to put his money behind his beliefs, as the vast majority of funds donated to Florida for a Fair Wage, the sponsor of the amendment, have come from Morgan and

WAGE | 2A

Virus numbers down, but fewer test results

By MARC VALERO
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — The Florida COVID-19 numbers are down with only 5 new resident deaths reported on Monday and 738 new cases, which is the first time since June 8 with fewer than 1,000 new cases in a day.

But, there were only about 20,000 test results statewide from Sunday compared to about 50,000 on Saturday and about 73,000 on Friday, which is likely a factor in the lower number of positive cases.

See the 'Cases by the County' graph on Page A2

According to the overall count of cases, Highlands County had only 4 new coronavirus cases for a total of 2,160 and no new deaths for a total of 86.

But, the previous day testing data shows Highlands with 8 new cases from 310 tests for a positivity rate of 2.58%. The state positivity rate was 4.22%, according to the latest update from the Florida Department of Health.

Hillsborough County, with 122, was the only Florida county with a triple-digit increase in virus cases.

It was the first time in many weeks that Dade County had less than 100 new daily cases with 71 new cases in the Monday update.

There were 13 counties with no new cases: Calhoun, Citrus, Franklin, Gadsden, Gilchrist, Glades, Gulf, Hamilton, Hendry, Holmes, Lafayette, Liberty and Wakulla.

Currently there are 23 hospitalized in Highlands due to COVID-19.

Florida's total number of COVID-19 cases is 701,302 with 14,037 resident deaths.

Florida resident cases involving people ages 25 to 34 numbers 127,272, the largest number in any age group.

There have been 4,492 deaths of Florida residents age 85 or older, the largest number in any age group.

There have been 5,721 deaths of residents and staff members of long-term care facilities.

Statewide there are 2,118 people hospitalized with primary diagnoses of COVID-19, the respiratory illness

UPDATE | 2A



COURTESY PHOTO

From left; Highlands Superintendent of Schools Brenda Longshore, Cenergistics energy specialist Tracy Robinson, School Board Member Bill Brantley, School Board Chair Donna Howerton, School Board Vice Chair Jan Shoop and Cenergistic Regional Vice President Steve Jones at a recent School Board meeting where the School District received the Energy Excellence Award from Cenergistic.

School District receives Energy Excellence Award

By MARC VALERO
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — The School Board of Highlands County's energy conservation efforts have paid off big in recent years through a program that has saved the district more than \$2 million in energy costs.

After surpassing \$2 million in savings from an energy conservation partnership, the School Board of Highlands County received the Energy Excellence Award from Cenergistic, a nationwide sustainability company.

The Energy Excellence Award is given to clients who have reached noteworthy financial savings from an energy program.

The School Board of Highlands County's program, which has been in place since 2015, has prevented carbon emissions equivalent to 24 million miles of automobile travel.

The program achieved such success the district renewed its partnership with Cenergistic in February.

"The School Board of Highlands County has set the example for sustainability across the region," said Steve Jones, Regional Vice President at Cenergistic. "This program has steadily increased savings since implementation and the trajectory is only pointing up."

School District personnel work closely with Cenergistic engineers, experts

and the Energy Specialist to audit and optimize energy-using systems across the organization to achieve healthier, more efficient buildings. The Energy Specialist tracks energy consumption at all campuses with state-of-the-art technology to identify waste and protect occupants.

In response to COVID-related shutdowns, the Energy Specialist used hundreds of facility audits to improve air quality and support facilities operations to ensure students can return to classes safely.

"Our partnership has allowed the School Board to recoup money that would otherwise go to electricity providers and redirect them to student learning and safely reopening schools," said Mike Averyt, School Board assistant superintendent of business operations. "The District has benefited greatly from this program."

Since the start of the contract, Tracy Robinson, as the Cenergistic energy specialist, has been checking the district's campuses and facilities for compliance with the energy-saving initiatives and looking for any maintenance or facility issues that are wasting energy.

According to the energy program renewal, the School Board is paying \$149,000 per year for three years with any savings after that cost staying



COURTESY PHOTO

Cenergistic energy specialist Tracy Robinson checks a reading to assure energy savings at one of the schools of the School Board of Highlands County.

ENERGY | 2A

HCSO makes massive drug bust

Special to HighlandsNews-Sun
COURTESY HIGHLANDS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



RAMIREZ-RIVERA

AVON PARK — A traffic stop in Avon Park on Sunday led to one of the largest drug seizures in recent memory for the Highlands County Sheriff's Office. Deputies confiscated enough fentanyl to kill nearly 40,000 people, as well as over a pound of heroin and nearly a pound of cocaine.

Around 7:40 p.m., Deputy

Seth Abeln saw a blue Ford Focus on North Central Avenue that had a tag light out. After Abeln stopped the vehicle, Deputy Ben Jones and K-9 Gentry were called to do a free air sniff of the vehicle.

Gentry indicated there were drugs in the car.

A search of the vehicle turned up a staggering

amount of narcotics:

- 554 grams of heroin
- 450 grams of cocaine
- 99.6 grams of fentanyl
- 975 oxycodone pills
- 107 Xanax pills
- 90 vape pens with liquid THC

A dose of 2-3 milligrams of fentanyl is enough to be deadly, meaning there was enough of the drug to kill 40,000 people using 2.5 milligrams as a fatal dose. To put that in perspective, that

would be enough to kill nearly 40 percent of the people in Highlands County.

The street value of the fentanyl is \$15,000. Add that to the \$20,000 of cocaine, \$40,000 of oxycodone and \$45,000 of heroin, and the total seizure is worth \$120,000 on the street, not including the value of the vape pens.

There was also a loaded handgun inside the car. The driver, 40-year-old Ruben Ramirez-Rivera, was arrested

and charged with:

- trafficking cocaine
- trafficking heroin
- trafficking oxycodone
- trafficking a controlled substance
- possession of opium or a derivative (fentanyl) with intent to sell/deliver
- possession of a Schedule III or IV drug with intent to sell/deliver
- possession of heroin with

RIVERA | 2A



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Good morning To
Anita Kilpatrick
Thanks for reading!

