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Mitch Ross accepts the gavel from Molly Paxton to symbolize the transfer of leadership in the Rotary Club of Bartram Trail – Julington Creek.

Mitch Ross takes helm of Rotary Club

By Al Kalter
mail@floridanewslines.com

The Rotary Club of Bartram Trail-Julington Creek welcomed new president Mitch Ross in July as part of the annual leadership transition observed by more than 32,000 Rotary clubs worldwide.

Ross, a Montana native who moved to north Florida in 2019, succeeds outgoing president Molly Paxton. He retired from a career in the tech industry after working as a sales engineer and cybersecurity specialist for Digital Equipment Corporation and IBM.

Ross earned a bachelor's degree in computer science from the University of Montana and a master's degree in management information systems from the University of

New Rotary Club president cont. on pg. 9

BTHS Bands perform at Carnegie Hall: A once-in-a-lifetime experience

By Kelly Kazmierski
mail@floridanewslines.com

April 18, 2025, is a day that won't soon be forgotten by the members of the Bartram Trail High School band, their director and their families. After months of rehearsals and fundraising, under the direction of Jason Duckett, student musicians performed at the prestigious National Band and Orchestra Festival at the world-renowned Carnegie Hall in New York City — a magical and unforgettable experience.

"This performance was a bucket list for sure," said Duckett. "A once-in-a-lifetime experience that will never be forgotten."

Duckett is retiring this summer after a 35-year teaching career, including the last 25 years building Bartram Trail High School's band program into one of the best in the state.

The performance didn't come easily. Over the past year, the band community came together to raise approximately \$200,000 to fund the trip. Through car washes, bake sales, silent auctions, a golf outing, sponsorships, and generous donations, the students and their supporters turned a far-off dream into a



Bartram Trail Symphonic Band and Wind Ensemble, under the direction of Jason Duckett, performed at Carnegie Hall on April 18, 2025.

proud reality.

Once in New York, the excitement was palpable. Students toured iconic landmarks, experienced the vibrant culture of the city, and prepared for their big moment. On Friday, April 18, members of the Bartram Trail High School bands stepped onto the historic stage of Carnegie Hall, a venue that has

hosted legends from Tchaikovsky to Billie Holiday.

Under the lights, the Bartram Trail Symphonic Band and Wind Ensemble delivered powerful and polished performances that moved the audience and filled the hall with emotion. The energy was electric, the acoustics breathtaking, and the experience is one the students will carry for the rest of their lives.

But the magic didn't end with the final note. In a touching gesture, Duckett was presented with the day's marquee sign featuring the band and school's name — a tangible piece of history the students brought home. It now serves as a symbol of what passion, dedication, and community support can achieve.


Bartram Trail's Carnegie Hall appearance marks a proud chapter in the school's legacy — a moment where heart and harmony made a dream come true.



BTHS student musicians enjoyed time in the Big Apple.



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From the publisher's desk:

It's with a bittersweet mix of gratitude and genuine sadness that I write today about the departure of a true cornerstone of Florida NewsLine: our esteemed editor, Martie Thompson. After more than 24 years of dedicated service, Martie is retiring, and while we wish her all the very best, her absence will be deeply felt by all of us who have had the privilege of working alongside her.

For nearly a quarter-century, Martie has been far more than just an editor; she has been the vigilant guardian of our journalistic integrity, the meticulous architect of our pages, and the quiet force behind countless stories that have informed, engaged, and reflected the vibrant communities we serve.

Her fingerprints are, quite literally, all over the publications we produce. From The CreekLine to Mandarin NewsLine, Ponte Vedra NewsLine to The Players Journal and The Ocean Breeze, among numerous others, Martie's keen eye, insightful judgment, and unwavering commitment to accuracy have shaped their very essence. She possesses a remarkable ability to understand the pulse of each community, ensuring that our content resonates deeply with our readers.

Beyond her formidable editorial skills, Martie was a true professional

and a wonderful colleague. Her calm demeanor, even amid the chaos of deadlines, is legendary. She is a mentor to many young journalists who passed through our doors, patiently guiding them and instilling in them the values of responsible and impactful reporting. Her quiet strength and unwavering commitment to our mission set an example for us all.

It's hard to imagine Florida NewsLine without Martie Thompson. She has been an integral part of our growth and evolution, a constant presence through countless technological changes and shifts in the media landscape. She has seen it all and through every challenge, her dedication to delivering quality local news never wavered.

On behalf of the entire Florida NewsLine family and indeed, on behalf of the communities she so faithfully served, I extend our deepest gratitude to Martie Thompson. Thank you, Martie, for your tireless work, your unwavering dedication and your invaluable contributions. You leave behind a remarkable legacy of excellence, and we will miss you dearly.

We wish Martie a future filled with joy, relaxation, and all the new adventures she chooses to pursue. She has certainly earned it.

Mark Pettus, Publisher



with State Attorney, 7th Judicial Circuit,
R.J. Larizza

Q: Hurricane season is upon us. Can you share some things readers can do to avoid the inevitable scams that go around this time of year?

A: As everyone knows, an active hurricane season is once again in the forecast. Homeowners need to remain vigilant for a variety of scams, to include an upfront scam where someone will come to your home and tell you that there's a risk of damage due to a tree in the yard falling in a storm or high winds and offer to take care of it. In this case, the best thing to do is to reach out to a trusted tree surgeon and have them take a look if you actually do have concerns — rather than take the word of someone knocking on doors in the neighborhood.

Q: What scams should readers be aware of after a storm?

A: Most of the scams are at this time. There are people coming door to door who aren't reputable and who aren't licensed contractors. Sometimes they do sub-par work and sometimes they take money and then do no work at all.

If you are in the unfortunate situation of having storm damage, insist upon seeing certifications, licenses and proof of insurance from anyone you hire to do work. Be wary of those soliciting door to door. You can also look companies up on the St. Johns County Clerk of Court's website, where they have a list of licensed contractors and also you can see if a contractor has any lawsuits pending against them for shoddy work.

Basically, if someone comes to you after you have sustained storm damage and tells you something that sounds too good to be true, it oftentimes is. Homeowners must do their due diligence. Be sure to contact your own insurance company, as they also have ways of verifying legitimate contractors.

Q: What should a homeowner do if they believe they have been scammed?

A: If there is a problem, first report it to local law enforcement. If necessary and if you believe that the problem is criminal rather than civil, you can always reach out to the State Attorney's Office.

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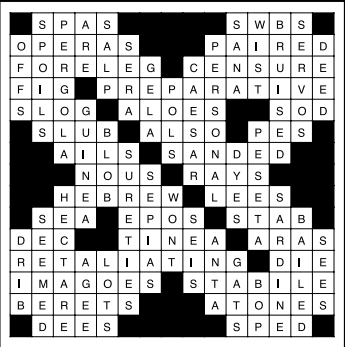
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MYSTERY PHOTO



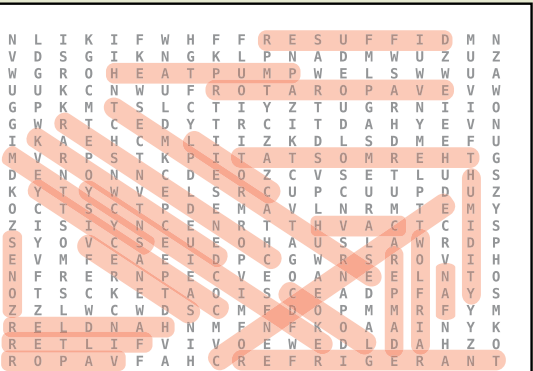
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July

Community Calendar

What's Happening in St. Johns

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Road in Orangedale. Cards, crafts and games start each day at 9 a.m. with trivia, nutrition/exercise, Bunco and Bingo among the additional activities before lunch at 11:30 a.m. each day. Contact Program Coordinator Jessica Curry at (904) 209-3658 or jcurry@stjohnscoa.com for more information.

Playing HOOKie, a group for those who enjoy knitting, crocheting and looming (with all items donated to charity) meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Road in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookie2022@gmail.com for more information.

Jokers Wild, a local card group, plays the game of "Hand, Knee, and Foot" on Wednesdays. If you are interested in joining, call (904) 230-6962 and leave a message.

1st: Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet on Tuesday, July 1 at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Presbyterian Church on the Loretto Road Campus in the Kids Space at 2501 Loretto Road. The program will discuss QuiltFest information and how to sign up. New members/guests welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

2nd: Widow to Widow, support group for widows by widows is held at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine on Wednesdays from 11:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

3rd: Open Game Play at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine. Bring your deck of cards or board game (there are

also games available at River House) and socialize over a friendly game of your choosing on Thursdays from 12:15 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

6th: A Course in Miracles Study Group meets on Sundays from 9 a.m. – 10 a.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Road. This is a unique spiritual self-study program designed to awaken attendees to the truth of oneness with God. Cost: Donation. Call (904) 287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com for more information.

7th: ACT and SAT Prep Classes Registration Begins offered by Friends of the Bartram Trail Public Library at Bartram Trail Public Library. Students may register for either or both test prep series. Classes run Wednesdays (Aug. 14, 21, Sept. 4, 11, 18): SAT 5 p.m. – 6:15 p.m., ACT 6:30 p.m. – 7:45 p.m. Fifty dollars per series or \$100 for both. Bring calculators and purchase required prep book. Limited to 25 students per series. Registration closes Aug. 10, 2025. Contact the library reference desk or email macyp17@yahoo.com for information.

10th: Independent & Unstoppable: Living a Healthy Life at Every Age, presented by River Garden, will be held at 11401 Old St. Augustine Road on July 10 from 11:30 a.m. – 1 p.m. Explore dietary practices for older adults that support heart health, energy and longevity, and learn how to start a simple walking program to boost mobility and mood. Pre-registration required for complimentary lunch at <https://shorturl.at/BPznB>.

12th: The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club meets the second Saturday of each month (this month, July 12) from 2 – 4 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. The July topic is "Patriotic ancestors, their

service, their accomplishments, their stories and how we found their records." New and experienced genealogy members are welcomed. Email ginglysh@comcast.net for more information. Visit www.facebook.com/groups/BTGenClubGroup to send a request to join the club.

15th: Happy Hookers crochet group will meet at the Bartram Trail Branch Library on July 15 from 5:30 – 6:45 p.m. The group crochets or knits blankets for cancer patients at area hospitals. All skill levels are welcome. Visit www.sjcpls.org or call (904) 827-6960.

16th: Free Tech Help with David will be held on Wednesday, July 16 from 10:30 a.m. – 12 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. Drop in for tech assistance with Android, Apple, and reader devices; no RSVPs required. Bring your device fully charged and know your passwords. Visit sjcpls.org/branches/bartram-trail-branch/ for more information.

18th: William Bartram Scenic Highway Group will meet on Thursday, July 18 beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Westminster Woods, Gathering Place Room. Join the discussion to keep NW St. Johns County Scenic and Historic and preserve the State Road 13 Scenic Highway. Virtual meeting access is available; contact alabbat@comcast.net or call (904) 699-8475.

21st: "God's Got Talent" Vacation Bible School, presented by River of Life UMC, will be held at 2600 Race Track Road, on July 21-24 from 6 p.m. – 8 p.m. Join us for the performance of a lifetime as we spotlight God's great talent and miracles. Ages 3-12 are welcome. Pre-registration required at ROLUMC.com under the events tab or call for more information.

21st: Container Gardening and New Beginnings, presented by St. John

County Master Gardener Karen Doyle, will be held at COA's River House, 179 Marine St., on July 21 from 9:15 a.m. – 11:15 a.m. Learn successful plant choices and design ideas for planting in pots. Attendees will have the opportunity to do their own hands-on container of cuttings to take home. If you want to make your own container garden, bring a small container, soil and plants. Pre-registration required at coasjc.coursestorm.com or call (904) 209-3655 (Monday to Thursday 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.)

21st: The All Star Quilters Guild will meet at 9:30 a.m. for socializing prior to the 10 a.m. meeting on Monday, July 21 at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. See the All Star Annual Challenge reveal and discover the stories behind each 36 inch square quilt. "Show and Tell" is always a feature. Guests are welcome. Visit www.allstarquilters.org for more information.

24th: Advancing the Science: The Latest in Alzheimer's and Dementia Research, presented by River Garden, will be held at 11401 Old St. Augustine Road on July 24 from 10:30 a.m. – 1 p.m. Join us for an informative lunch and learn session featuring the Alzheimer's Association and their innovative Brain Bus program. Pre-registration required for complimentary lunch at <https://shorturl.at/fSAdx>.

31st: Strength & Balance: The Otago Approach to Fall Prevention, presented by River Garden, will be held at 11401 Old St. Augustine Road on July 31 from 11:30 a.m. – 1 p.m. Pre-registration required for complimentary lunch at (904) 288-7855 or email kbell@rivergarden.org.

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with St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes

Q: Were there any significant changes to your budget for the upcoming FY 2025/2026 year?

A: The Elections Office fiscal year 2025/2026 budget was submitted with a 13 percent decrease from last year. This decrease is primarily due to CIP (Capital Improvement Program) funds requested in the current budget for the purchase of our new fleet of DS300 tabulation machines, as well as the difference in cost to conduct a presidential general election versus a gubernatorial primary election. In the FY 2025/2026 budget, we will only be funding the Aug. 18, 2026, Primary Election.

Q: In your June 17 budget presentation to the Board of County Commissioners, you mentioned a 2025 Addendum. What is this document?

A: The 2025 Addendum provides an annual update to my original 2022 Five-Year Strategic Plan. This document outlines accomplishments over the past year and identifies

upcoming future needs and goals across operations, budget, staffing, facilities, and equipment and technology.

Q: What were some key operational highlights from the current budget?

A: Most notably, the 2024 Presidential General Election, which celebrated a record 86.79 percent voter turnout in St. Johns County. Shortly after, two unexpected special elections were announced due to Congressman Michael Waltz’ resignation after his appointment to national security advisor. These events required immediate planning for polling locations, staffing, training and hiring of poll workers, and more.

Q: Looking ahead, what is the most pressing issue facing your office before the 2028 election cycle?

A: Our top priority is securing a new or expanded facility. In fiscal year 2023, the Board of County Commissioners allocated \$2 million with the intent to renovate the existing Elections Office building as a short-term

goal. Unfortunately, this allocation did not cover the basic needs affecting the Elections Office.

Q: What challenges does the current Elections Office facility present?

A: The Elections Office building was originally constructed in the 1960s and has been minimally renovated since our occupation in 1996. In 2008, the facility underwent a minor renovation adding offices, training space, and a secure vote-by-mail room. In 2022, warehouse space was transferred from the Clerk of Courts to the Supervisor of Elections, an appreciated expansion adjacent to the current warehouse. These two enhancements are the only changes that have occurred to the building in 18 years, despite a 90 percent increase

in population. The results of a special needs assessment conducted on the current Elections Office identified basic needs including additional public restrooms, training room space, secure space for the Canvassing Board, and an expanded parking footprint.

Q: Has any progress been made to address the facility concerns?

A: Yes. On May 29, County Administration presented a plan to expand our current facility by 9,530 square feet, with a proposed project start date of July 1, 2025 and a targeted completion date of Feb. 1, 2028. The proposed plan would also utilize the \$2 million dollar renovation allocation I received in fiscal year 2023.

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with St. Johns County Commissioner Christian Whitehurst, District 1

Q: At the June 17 meeting of the Board of County Commissioners, the tree ordinance part of the Land Development Code was discussed. Can you share your thoughts on this?

A: We once again took up discussion of proposed changes to our tree ordinance and I voted against all of them because I feel we already have a robust tree ordinance in place. Philosophically, we have to decide what can be mandated to be done to private property. We have a tree ordinance of hundreds of pages, actually about five pounds of pages in a book, that already addresses this. I believe property owners should have a choice and don't think government should be able to tell you what you can do on your property past a certain point, which I believe has already been well established in our existing ordinance. I respectfully disagree with the other commissioners who think we should have more requirements as I think we have enough government in our lives.

Q: What are the next steps?

A: The five points of the proposed changes to the tree ordinance that passed on June 17 will come back to our board, likely at one of the August meetings, for two readings before the board. A business economic statement, as required by the State of Florida, will be presented as well as a residential economic statement that was requested by our board. These statements will tell us how much the proposed changes to the ordinance will cost businesses and residents.

Q: Can you shed any insight on the space needs for constitutional officers discussion at the June 17 Board of

County Commissioners meeting?

A: This was actually spearheaded by Commissioner Jeremiah Blocker a few years ago when he was chair of the board to look at meeting space needs for these offices due to the growth of our county. The initial estimate at that time required building new structures at a proposed cost of more than \$100 million. At our June 17 meeting, we voted “yes” on a package of just \$14 million due to the hard work of our county administrator, staff and the constitutional officers themselves to reexamine the use of space we already have with a minimum of new structures. This was an incredible job by government in finding a way to be more efficient.

Q: Can you update us on the increase in fees for solid waste disposal?

A: We voted on June 17 to set the date for the hearing to raise fees for our solid waste provider, FCC. We knew there would be five year incremental increases in price and while the price will go up each year, it will still be less than all the other bids we received when we decided to award the contract to FCC.

Q: Do you have anything else to share with District 1?

A: Of note is that the regularly scheduled July 15 meeting of the Board of County Commissioners has been moved to July 22 for summer break purposes.

Q: What is the best way for our readers to contact you?

A: Readers can email me at bcc1c-whitehurst@sjcfl.us or call me at (904) 584-5348

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**Q&A with St. Johns County School Board
Member, Beverly Slough, District 1**

Q: How is the new superintendent settling in?

A: Superintendent Brennan Asplen is coming in with a bang. He has made some personnel changes already, among them moving Kyle Dresback to his (Asplen's) old position, Deputy Superintendent of Operations. Paul Abbatinozzi has been promoted to Chief of Staff and Dawn Sapp has been promoted to Deputy Superintendent of Curriculum. Basically, Dr. Asplen is trying to get his senior cabinet organized properly — not anything huge, just putting forth his vision.

He said that his goal is to be out in the schools a lot. He wants to really get to know the principals and spend time with the teachers for increased communication with them. We also have a school board retreat planned with him for the first week of July, where we will set goals.

Q: Are there any additional movements of principals?

A: Superintendent Asplen has moved Jay Willets, principal of Toco Creek High School, to Kyle Dresback's prior role in the district as liaison with high schools and alternative schools (to include St. Johns Virtual School and St. Johns Tech). Cathy Hutchins is staying in her similar role as district liaison with elementary and K – 8 schools. The new principal at Toco Creek High School

will be Kelly Jacobson, principal of Fruit Cove Middle School. Finally, her position as principal at Fruit Cove Middle will be filled by Angie Hensley, former assistant principal at Pedro Menendez High School. I believe with all these new alignments, Dr. Asplen has put things in place for an excellent school year.

Q: Do you have an update on the new schools under construction?

A: Jessley Hathaway, principal of Hal-lowes Cove Academy, expects to be able to move into the administration building of his new school by the second week of July. All will be in place to welcome students on the first day of school, Aug. 11.

The two new schools still under construction in Silverleaf and Seabrook/ Nocatee, are on pace to open as planned, in August 2026.

Q: What news do you have to share about summer activities for some of our teachers?

A: St. Johns County is a Professional Learning Community District and this summer, we sent 108 people (mostly teachers and some principals) to a conference to learn more about this. We will have experts in every building once they return. We have been participating in this for about three years and have seen excellent results, which we want to

Q&A with Beverly Slough cont. on pg. 9

Guest Column

Why are my property taxes higher than my neighbor's property taxes?

By St. Johns County Property Appraiser Eddie Creamer

Have you ever wondered why your property taxes are higher than your neighbor's property taxes since you both have a similar home and are homesteaded? Here are some reasons why this can happen.

Homesteaded properties have up to a 3 percent cap on the amount the assessed value can increase per year. If your neighbor owned their home for a longer length of time, then the 3 percent cap has been in effect longer, impacting the assessed value. The 3 percent cap is especially beneficial when the Just (Market) Value increases more than 3 percent per year.

Your neighbor could have benefited from Portability or Save Our Homes. This benefit allows a homeowner to transfer all or a portion of the tax savings received from one homesteaded property to another, not to exceed \$500,000. If a home utilized Portability or Save Our Homes, then that reduces the homesteaded property's assessed value. The Portability or Save Our Homes total can be calculated by subtracting your property's Assessed Value from its Just (Market) Value. You can also find this amount on

your TRIM notice or by calling our office. Visit www.sjcpa.gov/portability for more information on this.

Your neighbor could be receiving other exemptions besides just homestead exemption. Other exemptions include widow(er), senior, disabled civilian, military, first responder and more. Visit www.sjcpa.gov/otherexemptions for a full list of other exemptions and the qualifications for each. Exemptions can be applied for at your convenience through our website at www.sjcpa.gov or by visiting our office.

If you've updated your home with an addition, renovation or extra feature such as a pool, screen enclosure or other improvement, then this can increase the value of your property, which increases your property taxes. My office is notified when a building permit is pulled on a property, and we use that information to properly adjust the property's appraised value based on the new construction added.

I'm available to answer questions or provide additional information at Eddie@sjcpa.gov or (904) 827-5500.

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Reverend Yvonne McAndrew

ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Business Briefs

Financial advisor receives award for outstanding year

Heather Wright, an Edward Jones financial advisor in Fruit Cove, recently received the firm's exclusive Zeke McIntyre Pioneer Award, which recognizes new financial advisors who achieve high levels of success early in their careers with the financial services firm. She was one of only 111 of the firm's financial advisors to receive the award.

The award is named after Edward Jones legend Zeke McIntyre, who opened the firm's first branch office in 1957 in Mexico, Mo., launching the firm's trademark local-community branch office network. Today, there are more than 16,000 branch offices in North America.

"It's an honor to be recognized for the work I do building relationships with our clients and the positive impact we can make for them," said Wright. "I'm inspired by the fortitude of Zeke McIntyre who set in motion our system of branch offices in the same communities where our clients live and work. It makes my ability to partner for positive impact for my clients and in my community that much more effective."

Visit Wright's website at www.edward-jones.com/heather-wright for more information.

St. Johns County Clerk's Office expands services to Julington Creek

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's Office celebrated the expansion of services at its Julington Creek Annex with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The

Julington Creek Annex is located at 725 Flora Branch Blvd. and operates Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. by appointment only.

Services available include document recording for deeds, mortgages and other important records into St. Johns County's official records. The office also provides passport services, including new passport applications and on-site passport photos. Marriage licenses and ceremonies are available, with wedding ceremonies conducted on-site for couples wanting to say "I do" with a seamless licensing process. Notary services are also offered for official document notarization.

The expansion brings essential government services closer to residents in the northern end of the county, eliminating the need to travel to downtown St. Augustine for many routine transactions. Visit stjohnsclerk.com to schedule appointments or learn more about available services and required documentation.



Photo courtesy St. Johns County Clerk of Court



Photo courtesy Tracy McCormick-Dishman

Planet Smoothie St. Johns co-owner, Eliezer Dabid, cuts the ribbon Tuesday evening during the grand opening ceremony at 1405 St. Johns Pkwy, Suite 202. The St. Johns County Chamber of Commerce and Shyne Wayv hosted the event

Planet Smoothie celebrates ribbon cutting for new St. Johns location

Planet Smoothie St. Johns held its grand opening and ribbon cutting ceremony Tuesday evening at 1405 St. Johns Pkwy., Suite 202.

The St. Johns County Chamber of Commerce and Shyne Wayv hosted the 5:30 p.m. – 7 p.m. event, which featured free smoothie samples, games and giveaways for attendees.

The new location brings the franchise's real fruit smoothies and bold flavors to the St. Johns community, targeting families, professionals and students in the area. Planet Smoothie specializes in

what the company calls "better for you" smoothies made with real fruit ingredients.

It's locally owned; I live here in St. Johns County," said Eliezer Dabid, co-owner of Planet Smoothie St. Johns. "We sell healthy foods."

The business joins the growing number of food and beverage establishments along the St. Johns Parkway corridor, continuing the area's commercial development. The store is located in Suite 202 of the St. Johns Parkway shopping center.

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Get to Know ...

By Tracy McCormick-Dishman
editor@floridanewslines.com

Angela Soriano

Angela Soriano has been rescuing animals since she was in preschool, but she never planned to start an animal rescue. The 30-year-old founder of Celestial Pet Rescue operates a foster-based cat rescue that manages about 20 cats through a network of foster families. She also operates two TNR (trap-neuter-return) colony programs and dreams of opening a sanctuary where cats can roam free to show their true personalities to potential adopters.

Q: What was the moment that made you realize you had to start Celestial Pet Rescue?

A: The memory still makes my voice catch. I was finishing a long shift at work when I witnessed something that would change my life forever: someone throwing a kitten out of their car in the parking lot. I immediately went over to this kitten. She was infested with fleas, had scabies, and her front leg was broken. But that feeling of saving this kitten and giving her a chance – that’s what I want to do.

Q: How did you come up with the name Celestial Pet Rescue?

A: The name came from a friend who believed we all lived under the same sky – the friend who first got me involved in organized animal rescue. I’ve



Photo courtesy of Angela Soriano

been rescuing animals since I was in preschool, but this friend really helped me understand the bigger picture of what we could accomplish together.

Q: What makes your rescue different from traditional animal shelters?

A: We operate a completely foster-based cat rescue, caring for about 20 cats through a network of just five or six foster families. Unlike traditional shelters, our cats live in homes while awaiting adoption, giving them a better chance to show their personalities to potential families. We don’t like cats sitting in cages all day. I dream of opening a sanctuary where cats roam free inside a building where visitors can see their true personalities.

Q: What’s the biggest challenge you face in animal rescue work?

A: Animal abandonment is my biggest challenge. I recently rescued a spayed cat dumped at one of my colonies – surveillance footage showed someone simply opening their car door and driving away. Ninety-five percent of cats that we have seen that have not survived are dumped. They’re not used to hunting for their own food. The foster-based model keeps overhead low but creates constant capacity issues. We’re always looking for more fosters, sometimes more than donations.

Q: What can the community do to help solve the pet overpopulation problem?

A: I manage two cat colonies – groups of cats that establish territory together – working through TNR programs to control population without euthanasia. In Florida, we don’t have an off season for kitten season. We get kittens year-round, so they just repopulate. The humane thing is to end that repopulation without euthanasia. When people ask what the community can do to help end the overpopulation problem, my answer is simple but powerful: If you see something, don’t wait for someone else to handle it. Be the change you want to see in the world.

Q: How can people support Celestial Pet Rescue or get involved?

A: Celestial Pet Rescue operates solely on donations and we desperately need more foster families. People can reach us by email to celestialpetrescue@gmail.com or through Facebook.

Briefs

ACT and SAT Prep Classes offered by Friends of Library

The Friends of the Bartram Trail Library are sponsoring a series of ACT and SAT prep classes to be held at the Bartram Trail Public Library. The dates of these classes are Aug. 14, 21, Sept. 4, 11, and 18. Registration will begin July 7, 2025. Classes are one hour and 15 minutes each. Students may sign up for either or both series. The SAT classes will be from 5 p.m. – 6:15 p.m. and the ACT classes will be from 6:30 p.m. – 7:45 p.m.

The sessions will include two English/Reading and two Math. Following a practice test completed at home, the fifth and final session will be a review session from 5 p.m. – 6:15 p.m. for English/Reading and from 6:30 p.m. – 7:45 p.m. for Math. Students should bring their calculators.

Each series of five sessions costs \$50 or \$100 to attend both. These proceeds are a donation, and with the other donations are used to fund all library programs at the Bartram Trail Public Library. Purchase of a specific review/prep book is also required. There is a cap of 25 students per series.

The last day to register is Aug. 10 unless the cap is reached prior to this date. Registration information can be obtained at the Bartram Trail Branch Library or by contacting Phyllis Macy at macy17@yahoo.com.

Slate of community events announced for Park and Recreation Month

The St. Johns County Parks and Recreation Department has announced a slate of fun community events and activities for July’s Park and Recreation Month celebration. Participants in the Parks and Recreation programs held at county parks throughout July will have the opportunity to enter a drawing at the end of the month for park-related prize

Briefs cont. on pg. 10

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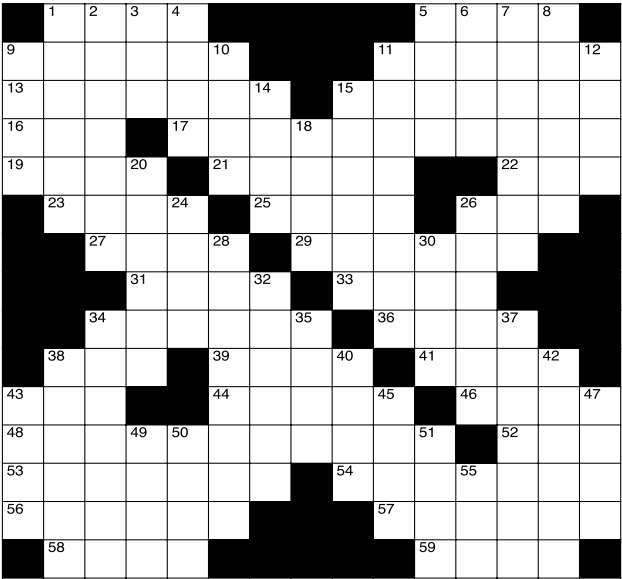
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



CLUES ACROSS

1. Resorts
5. One point south of southwest
9. Musical performances
11. Matched
13. Four-footed animal part
15. Express severe disapproval of
16. Type of leaf
17. Preparatory
19. Walk heavily
21. Succulent plants
22. Rectangle of grass
23. Lump in yarn
25. Too
26. Foot (Latin)
27. Afflicts
29. Smoothed
31. Mind (Greek)
33. Tampa ballclub
34. Semitic language
36. Sheltered sides
38. Ocean
39. Electronic point of sale
41. Thrust a knife into
43. 12th month (abbr.)
44. Ringworm
46. Father of Aoris (Greek myth.)
48. Fighting back
52. Cease to exist
53. Insects in adult stage
54. Freestanding sculpture
56. Caps
57. Repents
58. Brown and Wallace are two
59. Moved quickly

CLUES DOWN

1. Goes bad
2. Yard structure
3. They ____
4. Marine invertebrate
5. European river
6. Office supplies firm
7. Physically abused
8. Service stations in Australia
9. Kills
10. Liquid body substances
11. Particular to a given individual
12. Brave or noble act
14. Sicilian city
15. Conqueror
18. Elected officials
20. Type of “pig”
24. Drop of viscous substance
26. Monetary unit of Spain
28. Guarantees
30. Coloring materials
32. Reddish browns
34. Square measure
35. Will not
37. Canned fish
38. Appeared
40. Six (Spanish)
42. Took off
43. Negligible amount
45. Posts in a Greek temple
47. Witnesses
49. Phil ___, former CIA
50. Places to park
51. Guns
55. Dance to pop music

STAY COOL WORD SEARCH

N L I K I F W H F F R E S U F F I D M N
V D S G I K N G K L P N A D M W U Z U Z
W G R O H E A T P U M P W E L S W W U A
U U K C N W U F R O T A R O P A V E V W
G P K M T S L C T I Y Z T U G R N I I O
G W R T C E D Y T R C I T D A H Y E V N
I K A E H C M L I I Z K D L S D M E F U
M V R P S T K P I T A T S O M R E H T G
D E N O N N C D E O Z C V S E T L U H S
K Y T Y W V E L S R C U P C U U P D U Z
O C T S C T P D E M A V L N R M T E M Y
Z I S I Y N C E N R T T H V A C T C I S
S Y O V C S E U E O H A U S L A W R D P
E V M F E A E I D P C G W R S R O V I H
N F R E R N P E C V E O A N E E L N T O
O T S C K E T A O I S C E A D P F A Y S
Z Z L W C W D S C M F D O P M M R F Y M
R E L D N A H N M F N F K O A A I N Y K
R E T L I F V I V O E W E D L D A H Z O
R O P A V F A H C R E F R I G E R A N T

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

- AIRFLOW
CAPACITY
COIL
CONDENSATE
CONDENSER
COOL
DAMPER
DIFFUSER
DUCTWORK
EFFICIENCY
EVAPORATOR
FAN
FILTER
HANDLER
HEAT PUMP
HUMIDITY
HVAC
REFRIGERANT
SYSTEM
TEMPERATURE
THERMOSTAT
VAPOR
VENTS
ZONES

CRYPTO FUN



Solve the code to discover words related to air conditioning.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 22 = O)

A. 9 22 22 24 18 25 17
Clue: Make less warm

B. 5 21 25
Clue: Circulates air

C. 18 25 1 22 22 13 4
Clue: Inside

D. 13 26 16 21 18 13 4
Clue: Fixes

New Rotary Club president cont. from pg. 1

Maryland.

“We do a lot of good work, and we have fun doing it. It’s exactly what I was looking for,” Ross said about joining Rotary as an opportunity to serve the community and meet new friends.

During his presidential term, Ross hopes to attract younger members and facilitate the organization’s work with youth programs throughout the community.

Ross and his wife Celia have been married 41 years and have two adult daughters and two grandchildren. They live in Nocatee, where Ross plays drums with a community band, creates stained glass pieces and works on a 2003 BMW Z4 Roadster.

The club meets Thursdays from 7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m. at Westminster Woods on Julington Creek. Information is available at bartramtrailrotary.org, and guests are welcome.

Q&A with Beverly Slough cont. from pg. 6

continue.

A Professional Learning Community means there are groups of people (for instance, all third grade teachers at a school, or all math teachers) who perform common planning, share students, and share common tests so that all students can learn the same things per grade or subject.

Q: Do you have anything else to share

with District 1?

A: We have received preliminary testing data back from the state and we are very pleased. The official data will be received from Tallahassee sometime in July. School grades will not be available until September.

Q: How can our readers contact you?

A: They can email me at beverly.slough@stjohns.k12.fl.us or call me at (904) 547-7510.

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Briefs cont. from pg. 8

baskets. Attending events gives attendees the chance to enter their name for these prizes — the more events attended, the better the chances of winning will be.

“We love having a time of year that lets us celebrate everything Parks and Recreation does for community-building in St. Johns County,” Parks and Recreation assistant director Jamie Baccari said. “Parks and Recreation Month is that time, and we love seeing the smiles it brings to all the families who join us at our special events.”

The month's events will take place at

parks throughout the county, encouraging people to explore corners of their neighborhood they may have never visited before.

The weekly events will include:

- Popsicles in the Park
- Family Bingo Night
- Golfing events
- All Abilities Kayaking
- Reel in the Fun — kids' fishing tournament

Residents can visit www.sjcf.us/passport-to-parks/ for a printable calendar of all Passport to Parks activities.

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Fishing

Jimmy's Fishing Report

By Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewslines.com

Last month's report was all about shrimp and this one isn't going to be much different. We're having one of the best starts to shrimp season going on in the river so let's keep this momentum going.

I have covered how and where to catch them so let's focus on keeping them alive. Most of my life I've relied on a five gallon bucket with a battery powered aerator to keep bait alive on my boats. Shrimp aren't the most particular baits but keeping them cool and replacing the water often helps. It's also important not to overload your bait well since you can always catch more shrimp. It's better to have all live shrimp than half dead ones.

Rigging is simple. A 1/8-3/8oz chartreuse jig head is all you need. I like ones with longer shank hooks. Hooking the shrimp through the tail then twisting the hook and burying it back into the body of the shrimp keeps it very snag resistant. Floats work well in shallow water and free-lined is the most natural presentation but also the most difficult to do well.

Docks are one of best places to fish right now because they offer shade and a place to get out of the current. Just about any dock can hold fish right now but older docks along points and drop offs are always standouts. I also like docks over sand bottom as opposed to mud. Bridges in our area offer similar shade and current refuges so fish can be found there as well. Shell bars are another spot to consider even though they have no shade and limited current relief. They do congregate lots of shrimp, crabs, and small fish so bigger fish are not too far away. I think I've covered most of what you need to know about shrimp and fishing with shrimp in the river, but if you have any other questions feel free to send me an email.

Fishing has been hot which makes it almost too easy since catching shrimp is not a problem right now. It doesn't happen often so take advantage and go have some fun. Tight lines.

Trout Creek seniors keep busy at the center



Photos courtesy Jessica Curry

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Road in Orangedale. Cards, crafts and games start each day at 9 a.m. with trivia, nutrition/exercise, Bunco and Bingo among the additional activities before lunch at 11:30 a.m. each day. Last month, the seniors enjoyed a visit from Elvis. Contact Program Coordinator Jessica Curry at (904) 209-3658 or jcurry@stjohnscoa.com for more information.

Eagle Scout project addresses youth homelessness in St. Johns County



By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

Life Scout Jason Herren of Troop 280 completed his Eagle Scout project by organizing a basic needs drive for Port In The Storm Homeless Youth Shelter.

Herren was motivated to help after learning St. Johns County has more than 200 homeless youth attending county schools, with only one shelter assisting both male and female youth ages 18-24.

“Jason learned that one person can make a difference in the lives of others,” said a recent release.


Herren led scouts from Troop 280 and Troop 9280 in collecting food, hygiene items, underwear and gift cards for the shelter. The scouts also prepared approximately 65 lunches consisting of deli meat sandwiches, fruit, chips and Gatorade to address food insecurity.

The neighborhood Walmart in Fruit Cove donated a gift card used to purchase lunch items. Coastal Postal in Fruit Cove assisted with printing flyers for the drive.

The project brought awareness to local homelessness while allowing Herren to

demonstrate Scout principles through community service.

Port In The Storm is the county’s only shelter serving homeless youth in the 18-24 age range. Information about the organization is available at stfrancisshelter.org/programs/port-in-the-storm, along with ways to support their mission to move youth beyond the streets.




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Travel

Timeless Venice: A city built on water and wonder

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewslines.com

Venice, Italy, is one of those places that doesn't quite feel real. Built on water, it stands as both a marvel of engineering and a tribute to human determination. A visit to Venice feels like stepping into a 500-year-old painting that has come to life.

The Venetian lagoon was settled in the 5th–6th centuries AD on wooden piles driven deep into the soft ground. It grew into a powerful maritime republic—a network of canals, bridges, and stone buildings still supported by this unique underwater foundation. The place made my mind drift between reality and dreams.

St. Mark's Basilica

I started where most visitors do—Pi-



High noon on the Grand Canal.

azza San Marco. The square is wide and open, bordered by elegant arcades, cafes and the towering St. Mark's Basilica. The site immediately grabs your attention with its immense mosaic-covered arches and domes, blending Byzantine, Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Venice was always influenced by both East and West.

Inside, it's dark and glowing. Mosaics cover practically every inch, illustrating stories from the Bible in gold tiles. The original church was built in the 9th century to house the relics of St. Mark the Evangelist. Legend claims Venetian merchants smuggled his remains out of Alexandria, Egypt, in barrels of pork fat. While the story sounds unbelievable,

the relics remain inside the basilica, and the city has claimed Mark as its patron saint ever since.

The Doge's Palace and Bridge of Sighs

Next door stands the Doge's Palace, once the seat of government and home to Venice's ruler. Its pink and white lacy stonework looks delicate from the outside, but inside I was overwhelmed by grand halls filled with enormous historic paintings. I walked through

the Hall of the Great Council, where laws were debated beneath a gilded ceiling.

From there, a narrow corridor led to the Bridge of Sighs, connecting the palace to the old prison. Standing inside, I looked through the tiny window where prisoners supposedly took their last glimpse of Venice before sentencing—hence the name. It's a chilling contrast to the splendor of justice above.

The Grand Canal and gondolas

With no cars, the Grand Canal acts as Venice's main boulevard, curving like a lazy S through the heart of the city. Ride a vaporetto, the public water bus, to take it all in. See the old palaces, churches and hotels, all facing the water as they have for centuries.

Later, I splurged on a gondola ride—touristy, yes, but worth it. Gliding through the side canals, you pass under bridges, see laundry hanging, and finish beside mooring poles painted in bright blue and white. I loved the shimmering reflections of ancient facades, some crumbling and covered in moss, others restored. Venice is sadly decaying, yet the city continues to thrive.

Museums and local life

I visited many churches filled with art and Ca' Rezzonico, a museum set in an



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
A gondola on the Grand Canal

18th-century palace. Rooms are filled with period furniture, Murano glass chandeliers, and paintings that give a glimpse into aristocratic life. It's easy to picture masked balls and the life of Casanova playing out in these rooms.

But the best moments happened away from the crowds—in the back canals and neighborhoods, where I stayed in a small apartment. Here, Venice feels more authentic. Locals shop at small markets, children play in alleyways, and I got lost more than once, wandering into quiet courtyards and crossing tiny bridges.

Venice may be aging, but it still moves with life. Wear comfortable shoes, allow time to wander, and let yourself get a little lost. Venice always leads you somewhere worth seeing.

Visit www.bylandersea.com to read more of local travel writer Debi Lander's stories and travel tips.

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Dr. Vaziri is committed to serving the community he calls home. Outside the clinic, he enjoys spending time with his family and fishing the coastal flats. His passion for medicine is rooted in a deep desire to help people regain their quality of life so they can get back to doing the things they enjoy with the people they love most.

To request an appointment with Dr. Vaziri, call **904.388.6518** or scan the QR code.



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